



# Great Saints



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TRANSLATED BY WILLIAM STIRLING



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FRANCIS ALDOR LONDON  
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★ ISABEL ★ TO WHOM BUT YOU? ★

(HÖLDERLIN TO DIOTIMA)



## THE PHENOMENON OF THE SAINT

### An Introduction

AN UNKNOWN world unfolds itself before us when we come face to face with the Saints. New dimensions fill us with unbounded wonder. The language of man has not words enough to describe the Saints' greatness. Their close connection with the divine, the religious depth of their wisdom, and the underlying spiritual understanding of the Saints, has scarcely a parallel in the history of human thought. By the very extraordinariness of their existence they tower above princes and philosophers. Saints have to be judged by other standards and other values. When their lives have to be enacted on this earthly stage, it is as though they stood high amid a level plain, overtopping all else. The Saints continually give us the most unexpected surprises. In order to find the proper approach to them (who still belong, in part, to the universal consciousness, and who still trail their clouds of glory behind them) we require a certain inward preparedness, a readiness to experience a new reality which in no way accords with our own, and which therefore cannot be judged by normal standards.

Men who have been granted an inner knowledge which enables them to understand the secret lives of the Saints have invariably spoken of them with the greatest awe and respect. As Pascal drew near to the end of his tragic life, when he was himself approaching the sphere of the Saints, understanding flared up in him: "The Saints have their own country, their radiance, their victory, their nobility. They have no need of either worldly or spiritual greatness, and have nothing to do with something which can neither give them anything nor take anything from them. They are seen to be of God and the Angels, not just made of bodies and enquiring minds; God is enough for them."<sup>1</sup> According to Pascal, who was himself illuminated by the divine fire, the Saints create their own wonderful order of things, which is different from that of all other men, and which, by reason of its religious structure, we can only come to know through inspiration. The author of the *Pensées* was not the only man able to penetrate within the mystery of the Saints by means of his own intuitive perception. Even to the young Nietzsche, not yet deluded by the philosophy of power, was the vision revealed in a happy moment: "Nature, finally, has need of the Saint, since in him the Ego is utterly fused and dissolved; and yet, though his life of suffering can scarcely be conceived as being more individual than it is, his life is also the expression of the deepest sympathy shared with and in all other living beings. Nature requires the Saint since he alone knows the miracle of transfiguration; growth and development, the very highest and most sustained incarnation, never weary him. And pressing onward in the path of the Saint, goes

Nature, seeking her own salvation from herself."<sup>2</sup> With his instinctive sense of religious values, Nietzsche was well aware that Saints are enraptured in an ecstasy, and that in them the flaming, searing stream is not yet congealed into grey lava. It is for this reason that he mentions Saints together with artists and sages.

Although the Middle Ages were still able to depict their Saints against the golden background of eternity, and in this way provided the beholder with at least some notion of them, this art has been lost during the last few centuries. The practical knowledge of to-day can tell no more about the Saints. They have disappeared from its horizon, and not a glimmer of their radiance now breaks through the enlightened wisdom of modern man. The disappearance of the world of Saints may be attributed to a variety of causes. It is due to the lack of differentiation between the consecration of the Saints, and their appreciation as human personalities, in which the consideration of the Saint as a religious figure has been identified with hagiolatry. The rationalistic abolition of the world of Saints has been injurious to no small degree, for it has no understanding of the symbolical conception of the world in which these messengers of God once dwelt, and has aspired to explain everything on a rational basis, even including what is essentially and completely irrational. The absence of anything sensory in the Saints, implicit in rationalism, was bound to lead to the dissolution of their reality. Another factor which has added to the constantly increasing ignorance prevalent to-day regarding the Saints is that they are all pressed down into the same mould, without anyone bothering to ask if they fit or not. Daubed in such false, bright colours, the Saints have been shut up into lifeless forms, which have become suspect to modern opinion. Only very occasionally nowadays, and then as an exception, is the overpowering greatness of the Saints described as being something really great.

Whichever one of the foregoing reasons we may choose to consider as the principal cause of the gradual fading away of the world of Saints, nobody will deny, surely, that the result has been to make the Christian world the poorer. It has suffered a grievous loss which cannot be easily compensated. The setting of the sun on the grandiose world of the Saints must be deemed to be a tragic fate which has no parallel in history. And as a consequence, Christianity has forfeited its greatest representatives. The salt is gone which made the fare yield nourishment. The most fascinating feature of Church history is to be found in those figures who rose above the pettiness and frailty of man, who preached the Gospel with dauntless resolution and who were seized in a holy frenzy. And when these divinely inspired men are no longer known and recognised, it can only mean the downfall of Christianity. As a consequence of this catastrophe damage is wrought, and something is surrendered and lost for ever: a penalty which cannot, under any circumstances, be evaded.

The abandonment of the Saints was disastrous to such an extent because it completely ignored the most significant of Christian manifestations. This is a truth which cannot be sufficiently stressed. That the

Saint is also a phenomenon of religious history in no way conflicts with our assertion. In this connection, however, we have to think of the Saint as one of Christ's images, which we should not allow to decline to the level of a purely denominational affair. There is no doubt that within the Christian world the Catholic Church has so far provided the most fruitful soil for the Saints. The Saints have written by far the fairest page of glory in the history of Catholicism, and this deserves unreserved recognition. They present the brightest side of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, the view that the Saints are the private property of any particular Church is erroneous. There were already Saints in the time of the olden Church and in the Middle Ages, long before Christendom was split up. Similarly, the Eastern Church has produced great Saints, such as Sergius of Radonesch and Seraphim of Sarow, who are highly honoured by the people of Russia, but who cannot be mentioned in this respect, simply because their spiritual experiences have unfortunately found no written expression.<sup>3</sup> Nor has the Anglican Church allowed the Saints to disappear entirely from people's minds, and so has been able to establish a significant continuity.<sup>4</sup> The Saint has not even completely vanished from continental Protestantism, as we shall show in due course. As apart from the denominational aspect, we must not lose sight of the fact that the true Saint, by sheer virtue of his greatness of soul, far transcends the limits of his own Church: typical of this is John Sebastian Bach who, with his music, reaches out beyond the Lutheran world, and is enabled to take possession of men who pay no heed at all to his Protestant beliefs. The true Saint belongs to all Christendom, and is not intelligible to one religious denomination only. The emphasis which we place on this in no way means that we propose to supplant the Saints from those Churches where they have taken root: rather would we point the way to them, so that their membership of one Church in the vault of Heaven can be extended to the others. Of the truth of the Saints as Christian manifestations the Apostles' creed has already spoken, when it employs the term "communion of Saints." As the true interpreters of the Gospel they embrace the whole of Christendom, for they represent that secret Christianity, which must not be allowed to disappear from modern religious consciousness.

The very grave harm which all Christians have suffered as a result of their misconstruction of this truth, can only be repaired by a new oath of consecration to the world of Saints. Christians to-day must come to realise once more that a proper appreciation of the Saints brings with it immeasurable spiritual wealth. Even in the last century the liberal Church historian, Karl Hase, inveighed against the blind disregard with which the Saints are treated; and he besought the Protestant Church, "boldly to appropriate the Saints of the Middle Ages to itself."<sup>5</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, too, considered "Augustine, the great Saints, the Mystics and, above all, the Reformers, as the renewers and educators of the prime force underlying true Christianity."<sup>6</sup> Nothing, of course, can be accomplished by exhortation alone. Men must dig out from beneath all the litter and rubble that "secret catholicism of the Saints," who, according to Hermann

Kutter, "often spoke a language, which—to judge by the text at least—is in almost complete harmony with our own";<sup>7</sup> the unknown world of the Saints must come back to modern men once more, and appear before them in all its power and authority. And yet scarcely any help is required in order to accomplish this, if we but heed carefully the change which the figures of the Saints have undergone in the course of ecclesiastical history: in the dawn of Christianity all men who believed in Christ were deemed worthy of Sainthood; then, during the early Catholic Church, the title was set aside for only a few isolated Christians, who had to achieve the honour by martyrdom; and, finally, in the Middle Ages the concept of a Saint was revised and modified so that it could only be applied to deceased Christians, who were obliged to undergo a prolonged period of canonisation. Obviously this does not help us to arrive at a proper appreciation of the world of Saints. Clearly what we must strive to do is to push forward once more the original and fundamental perception of the Saint as a Christian figure.

To do this a new examination of the Saints is absolutely indispensable. The word examination is used, since a mere definition comes nowhere near enough. Their essence cannot be grasped in terms of sociology or the history of religion. The Saint must be examined, but not in the same way as one of Goethe's abstractions. "There is no such thing as Saints in themselves, but only concrete Saints."<sup>8</sup> For this reason their essential characteristics can only be made manifest in a variety of different forms. And every outward manifestation of the Saint, which is different from every other one, although they all spring from the same source, has to overcome the obstacle which Georges Bernanos has indicated: "Saintliness cannot be fitted into any formula, or rather, it can be adapted to suit all formulae. It embraces and towers over all other forces, it embodies and compresses into one all the highest qualities of mankind. To come to know saintliness we have to exert ourselves, to share, as it were, in their life's form, in their ineffable upward soaring."<sup>9</sup>

Our new examination of the Saint shows, in the first place, that he is different from other men. It is not that he himself has stepped out from the usual run of men, but that God Himself has taken him out, calling him to an especial task. And it is this which reveals his greatness, a greatness which is so essentially different from that of other men. It is this greatness of Holiness, of Saintliness, which only God can best bestow, and which has no connection whatever with the fame and glory of man. It may even be present in complete obscurity. By reason of his exceptional character the Saint cannot be placed in the class of so-called interesting men, which is a rough designation, totally removed from the quality of holiness. Saints are figures out of the ordinary, since they are sanctified by Holy God. The nobility, and the peril, too, of these chosen men is to be noted, in the first place, in their meditation. And once we have identified the Saint as one specially marked out by God it means also that, obviously, we cannot classify him as an ordinary man.

The exceptional character of the Saint is usually to be seen in his moral

purity. The traditional biographies of the Saints delight in presenting their heroes, when young, as paragons of virtue, and when old, as never paying the slightest heed to the temptations of the world. But by overemphasising the ethical aspect of them in this way, the stress is wrongly marked. The great Saints have nothing of the improbable air of ideal men about them. The lives of numerous Saints show that they too, at first, followed in the way of sin, and that they had to endure severe struggles to free themselves. The moving life of Margaret of Cortona is one of the most impressive examples of contrite repentance in the whole of Christian history. The overcoming of the lower world is, of course, in the very nature of the Saint. The man who, however distinguished he may be, has never been able to master all his faults, can never be spoken of as a Saint. Nevertheless, moral virtue is by no means the same thing as saintliness, and it is a mistake to consider the Saint principally as a moral man. The true nature of the Saint can only be comprehended if we are quite clear about the chief difference between saintliness, or holiness, and morality. Whenever the Saints have to do with morality, the demands made upon them invariably reach heroic proportions. They have always surpassed by far the customary ethical requirements; and it is their execution of these which fills us so profoundly with awe and wonder. For they do more than the mere exercise of virtue, and it is this "more" which enables them to enter the sphere of the divine will.

It was Rudolf Otto, in his book *Das Heilige*, who first observed that we find in the Saints the deepest expression of the religious quality. And it is as a religious man that the Saint must be understood first and foremost. Religiousness, indeed, is so thickly concentrated in the Saint that it would be absolutely impossible to ask to find more. Everything is centred round this innermost flame. Saints are not religious into the bargain, they are *only* religious men, with an exclusiveness, moreover, which seems to burn everything up in its consuming fire. There are others, of course, who stand beside them, and who must be included in the religious category: such are the priest, the prophet, the Apostle, and the Reformer. But within the group of these religious manifestations the Saint is to be set apart as a type of the most exceptional significance. Although religiousness may be counted the most profound of all the primitive emotions and feelings of man, which is never wanting in any individual or race of men, it is not equally pronounced wherever it is encountered. While, owing to insufficient care and attention, this primitive religious feeling languishes and dies away in many men, in the Saint it is like a strongly marked talent, a gift which he endeavours to increase out of all recognition by every means within his power. The Saint is a religious, highly gifted man; and his essential nature can, in the first place, be brought within this formula. This statement is certainly a profane version of the quality of religiousness, but it has the advantage of not being worn out and hackneyed like the definition, "man of grace." In the Saint the gift of religiousness assumes the form of genius and often brings to light possibilities in man which had been quite swallowed up. In its religiousness this gift of the Saint's is in

direct contrast to the scholars and scientists, who set out to conquer the world, while the Saint devotes himself exclusively to inner, transcendental realities. More valuable than mere railing against the barren representatives of the religious quality in Church history—the result of which can only lead to a negative conclusion—is it for us to pay attention to the religious, highly gifted man, who must be placed in the very highest position in the scale of values as the greatest created form of Christian, and from whom it is essential that we should learn.

The religious quality of the Saint is manifested in his unceasing striving after perfection. The words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect," prescribe the Saint's utmost goal, to attain which he exerts all the might and vigour of his soul. There have been Saints whose holiness has, as it were, been with them from the cradle. The vast majority of them, however, have had to encompass themselves about with a tenacity of purpose, until it eventually becomes a part of them. The process of hallowing and self-dedication is a religious, spiritual one, which has no end in this lifetime. The pursuit of truth as the greatest significance is not the thing which places these chosen men of God in the front rank, but their striving after holiness as religious perfection. With a clarion call to all their spiritual energies the Saints have laboured ardently in their laborious ascent towards this goal, and they have wrought prodigies of spiritual exertion and endeavour in order to comply with the words of the New Testament: "This is the will of God, even your sanctification." The Saints have taken this charge, which implies a complete transformation in a man, with tireless and inexorable earnestness. This striving after sanctification and holiness pursues them relentlessly throughout their lives, and only at the last do they win for themselves a share of God's Holiness. Their pursuit of perfection never comes to a standstill. Unremittingly they toil with themselves, fight with themselves, seeking to subdue themselves and longing to draw nearer to the highest goal. Saints are men who are at all times inwardly driven to advance, and to whom it is never given to enjoy the attainment of their goal, since this cannot be reached during their lifetime. The goal of perfection is always calling them further and further on, and they make unceasing endeavours to climb yet higher, even when they already stand upon those giddy heights which mankind, imprisoned in his daily round, can never know. Hence springs the matchless inward exaltation which is proper to their lives. All Saints are, figuratively, children of the Gothic, which points ever up and up, and for which enough is never enough. It is this which gives to their existence the dynamic character which cannot be denied to true religiousness. It is the struggle for an inward form which is the mark of the Saint, and gives his life that tempestuous buoyancy which threatens to sweep through everything. Although there are also different grades of holiness, we find scarcely one figure wherein the continual straining after an unattainable peace is not established.

It is a mistake to consider this unremitting struggle for perfection as a

shifting of the basis of the community of God from that of the sinner to a state of meritoriousness. Moreover, this suspicion is rendered illusory by the New Testament charge, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord." A true striving after the inward form in no way leads man to self-righteousness. The more earnestly the Saints have striven for perfection, the more apparent has their own insufficiency become to them. No Saint has ever regarded himself as a Saint. They have at all times borne in mind that holiness is, first and foremost, an attribute of God, which He bestows upon His chosen people, and which is never a sovereign act of men. As a result of the purification of their consciences the Saints were possessed of a strongly defined sense of sin, which must not be considered as merely sham humility. The feeling of insufficiency springs rather from the knowledge that the more clearly man perceives his own unholiness, the nearer he comes to the Holiness of God. Nor does the dictum of Saint Paul, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God," rule out the possibility of holiness. Sin is in direct opposition to holiness, but the Saint, like Isaiah in his vision of the temple, would be purged of sin by a seraph, "having a live coal in his hand"; and he is the man to whose lot the forgiveness of sins has fallen.

It is that striving after religious perfection which underlies the goal, as expressed by Kierkegaard on his deathbed: "It is essential to come as near to God as possible."<sup>10</sup> And it is nearness to God, not ascetic behaviour, nor even exceptional virtue, which is the exclusive sign of the Saint. They aspire throughout this life towards a nearness to God; and all their exertions are laboured to this one end, so that they may prove worthy of God, and be able to show Him their worthiness. From this awful proximity to God springs the feeling of sinking into nothingness; but from it, too, comes that Heavenly bliss which cannot be described in ordinary words. And from the same source their lives receive that significance which other men can scarcely perceive. Not only are their own lives filled with this significance, but they are able to reveal the veiled mystery to other men; and the secret of this lies in the fulfilment of the two commandments, that they should love their God with all their hearts, and their neighbours as themselves. The nearness of God is manifested in the Saints by a fervent love of God, in striking contrast to the majority of Christians, who usually scarcely even know of the agape even by name. It is his love for God that makes the Saint holy, for through it God honours him with His ineffable grace. From the Saint's love of God flows out that self-sacrificing love for his fellow-men, which is never wanting in him as long as he has life. Only if we observe this double commandment are we able to plumb the deepest resources of our endeavours. Through the agape alone the Saint does not come near to God, for he is near to God already. He *has* come face to face with God, and *has* experienced the reality of God. It is this, above all, his experience of God's reality, that we look for in the Saint; and we find, side by side with it, a man who has penetrated more profoundly into God than other men. A beam of God's radiant Holiness has fallen on him, and therein lies the incomprehensible fluid which streams out from him. The

irresistible power of attraction which the Saint exercises over men, springs from this mystery of God's nearness. Almost everybody who goes near him senses the charismatic atmosphere, charged with Divine virtue. Even the reader of the life of a Saint comes perceptibly nearer to God, and the reader often becomes so overpoweringly aware of it that it rouses in him the liveliest longing to encounter the Saint in his own lifetime. It is from this unique impression, which the Saint has always made on men, that Bloy's understandable outcry arose: that if a Christian has ever caused even the slightest hurt, then he cannot be a Saint.

Side by side with this nearness to God is the magic essence which is characteristic of the holy man. Saints are men continually seeking, with the peculiar characteristic that a religious revelation has already been granted to their urgent, impassioned seeking; and their further search is thus the result of what they have already found. The signs of saintliness are in them, since they already embody, in this life, a fully lived and pious existence, which is accomplished wholly through the medium of God. We must bear in mind their realisation of Christian precepts; for their lives were not based on the command, "Thou shalt not," but illustrate the words of Jesus, according to the Gospels: "Blessed are they . . ." An integral part also of their lives is, of course, that process of formation which, as with most men, is indispensable to a proper understanding of their own natures. But the Saints have passed through the storm and stress of the years of development, and have reached maturity. The process of fermentation has given way in them, thanks to their nearness to God, to a tranquil clarity. Side by side with their Gothic yearning we find that they are also possessed of a Romanesque peace in God. When the signs of holiness begin to shine forth, man is approaching the state of his perfection. For this reason the Saint's work is, first and foremost, his life, in which the work is fully contained. The Saints rest in a divine ordering of their being, which lays open the indefinable secret of their lives, and which, in the final estimate, is the result of something inexplicable. They are steeped in Light to such an extent that we cannot but love the Saints.

The new examination of the Saints reveals them to us in their uttermost depths, if we but heed the function which these messengers of God perform. They are not just freakish beautiful flowers, blooming in the wilderness of this world, which do nothing more than exhale a wondrous fragrance. They are not useless men because they have withdrawn from the whirl and bustle of life. Although Saints cannot be considered from the purely utilitarian point of view, they have, all the same, a highly significant function to perform. Human society cannot dispense with the Saints for the duration of existence. It has as much need of them as of its other members. Bearing in mind that the Saints are manifestations of Christ, it follows that they transmit their virtue in manifold ways, which, in this connection, cannot be disputed. Only the principal tasks which are entrusted to them within the framework of Christianity need be mentioned, on the score of their significance.

The Saint has at all times been granted the function of providing an

example. Since their lives acquire a symbolic value, they have been considered as exemplary, as models for whom we should give thanks to God, and through whom we are able to strengthen our belief and faith. The Saints embody an ideal, and at the same time point the way to mankind and show a way by which it may be attained. The power of their example is of the very greatest importance, since Christianity grows out of encounters with vital Christians. The greatness of this cannot be denied since it has lasted through the centuries. The Saints may be likened to flaming, light-shedding symbols which arouse the ordinary man, lost in the mud and mire of his daily life, and point out the way to the heights. It is for this reason that they were called "the living Gospel," a phrase which they illustrate in their acts. Therein consists the true meaning of the menology, as it is expressed in the immortal *Legenda Aurea*: "The soul of mankind must always be in the closest contact with the great events of the world, which have been and always will be enacted in the kingdom of God and of the devil ever since the Creation until the Day of Judgment."<sup>11</sup> But the significance of the example of the Saints increases in potentiality by being perpetually renewed throughout the course of the centuries. Not only once do we encounter a life of wonder such as the Saint's: God is continually giving fresh testimony of Himself through them. By means of this continual manifestation of God the Saints always are able to present mankind with their example, adapted to the changing circumstances. They are the unceasingly new embodiment of Christianity, the incarnation, as it were, of the Christian idea and its living memorials. The Saints refute incontrovertibly the point of view that Godliness could only be achieved in bygone ages and was then swept from the face of the earth, a theory which would imply the death of all religiousness. The Christian spirit must be continually reincarnated, and the men of every century brought into conformity with its ways. Only from this continual renewal of the pattern does a vital religious influence flow. Saints practise a burning reality. In spite of his exceptional nature the Saint is an exemplary man, whose life cannot be slavishly aped, since it has the value of its original perfection. Many Saints are still an active force to-day, and a serious association with them always serves, ultimately, to awaken in us a religious quality; for they kindle a fire within the spectator—a fire which never is extinguished. Stimulating and vital impulses are aroused by them, virtues which drive men to take up the struggle for the formation of their own lives.

Upon the renewal of the pattern or example depends yet a further function of the Saints, which becomes apparent if we try to penetrate into their inmost secrets. It is wrong to consider their verbal pronouncements as the most important thing about them. Saints are not fundamentally religious thinkers. If we attempt to examine them from the philosophical point of view, we shall be approaching them in the wrong way. We find in the Saints, of course, many wise sayings which are invaluable, and cannot be exchanged for all the gold in the world. But it is not the new thoughts, uttered by them, to which we turn in the first place; rather should we turn to their principal glory, the impression of religious truth which informs

their whole lives. It is thanks to this real art of theirs that they have frequently contrived to shed an entirely new light on some text from the Bible, which has previously not been understood; and in so doing they have given men the impression of hearing the same truth for the first time. They are possessed not only of normal vision, but also of a divine insight in a truly superhuman relationship which is denied to other men. It stands to reason, of course, that we must not overlook their pronouncements—any more than we would any religious utterances about Godliness—which should not be taken literally, but behind which lies an objective truthful quality. In religiousness, however, it is not principally a question of perception or intuition, but of the dwelling-place of the soul. Holiness depends on the soul and not on the intellect. It is on account of this spiritual aspect that we find so many feminine representatives among the Saints, although only too often the history of the Church is the history of men: which is surely not the purpose of Christianity. That there should be such a large number of holy women in the world shows that holiness is an outpouring of the religious heart which has experienced contact with God. By reason of this relationship Saints do not think with their intellect like scientists or men of commerce. When we turn to the Saints we encounter that significant thinking which springs from the heart, and which alone is appropriate to religiousness. They make use of symbolical meditation which obeys laws quite different from those observed by rational thinking which enquires into the cause and effects of things. The internal decay of Christianity is not primarily due to the Godlessness and materialism of modern man but to the preponderance of rational over symbolic thought in religious questions. This fact must be borne in mind if we are to comprehend the far-reaching depths of the breakdown in Christianity in modern times. Rational thinking, with its tendency to explain away analytically the symbolic perception of the world, can only lead to disintegration. One of the greatest services which the Saints could perform for modern man, would be for him, through a long acquaintance with them, to learn once more to think from the heart, which is another kind of thinking, based on an image and not on an idea, and which is overlaid by normal logic, which, on its own, is not powerful enough to unite the two antitheses. The heart, as it were, *sees* the truth when it exercises that intuitive thought which, in a way quite unknown hitherto, is able to penetrate into the religious truth and, by loving it, is illuminated by it. Symbolic thought in no way indulges in nothing but allegories, and is no less satisfied with reality than are rationalist demonstrations. It is difficult to see why such little attention is paid to this logic of the heart, which is able to comprehend, at one and the same time, the different aspects of the truth, and which alone is adequate for religious understanding. Pascal was one of the last Christians to draw attention to the principle underlying the difference between these two ways of thought, and was most lucid about the great importance of this when he declared so movingly: "So it is, when we are concerned with the things of man, that we say that we must come to know them before we love them—which has

become proverbial—as opposed to the Saints, who, when they speak of the things of God, say that we must love them in order to come to know them, and that only by love may we enter into the way of truth.”<sup>12</sup>

There is still one more important function which the Saint has to fulfil, and which leads into actuality. One may describe the Saint as a timeless man, whose attitude is eternally valid. But in spite of this timelessness he is often the same man who has risen up against his own time, when it was about to sink into nothingness. Many a time with a silent word has he stressed the fact that it is important to concentrate on the one thing needed, and to strive for inward unity. In contrast to the man who dissipates his energies in a hundred different ways, the Saint invariably centres himself on what is essential and is constantly concerned to overcome human chaos. It is, of course, no coincidence that Dostoevsky, in his efforts to overpower modern Nihilism, was on the lookout for suitable helpers, and that in this way he should, logically, come upon the Saints. In opposition to the nihilistic rebelliousness of Ivan Karamazov he set up the Staretz Sossima as a Saint, who shines through the Karamazovian confusion like a beacon, blazing out into darkness. The Saint is the opponent of the nihilist always, in whatever form he be encountered. Pitted against the man who sets out to cast doubts upon the eternal, the indispensable, and the original gift, and to make them appear to be impossible, is the Saint, with his absolute values which cannot yield to sceptical corruption. With his divine illumination he sets his face, as an unquestioning man, against the demon of decay. The Saint possesses a profound knowledge, not only of man's corruption, but also of what is needful for his deliverance, for he does not live in a naive state of meditation, contemplation, and unsuspecting innocence. As few men do, he sees only too clearly the perilous abyss before man's feet, and is the only person with sight among the totally blind. The Saint may be viewed quite simply as the positivist man who sets constructive endeavour in the place of the tendency towards destruction. From the vantage point of his religious position he opposes, with his superior strength and virtues, the undermining, centrifugal currents of his generation. Metaphysically, he is the representative of God in a struggle to the death with the servants of the devil. And this dangerous and exciting occupation was the function, too, of the Saints of the Middle Ages. It would be a mistake not to believe that this same struggle was being carried on to-day in the same way as before. In this respect, the attitude of knowledge, in modern times, has changed too far. In order to turn back the currents which are undermining the present a new holiness is required. The Saint of to-day presents a totally different appearance from that in which we are wont to meet the traditional pattern. There are certainly faint traces of modern holiness to be discerned in the Russian revolution of the nineteenth century; but its representatives were swept away by theoretical atheism. The new kind of Saint has to move in the centre of the world's turmoil, and in no circumstances must he overlook the grievous harm of social want. Only by means of a Saint in modern dress, not by a particular party, or by a general view of the world, can the longed

for transformation of life be brought to an end; for this is coming gradually nearer and nearer, though its form cannot yet be discerned.

In order to obtain an effective picture of the Saints a new kind of hagiography is needed, in which we must take into account their fundamental attributes. This new way of writing about the Saints is based on the old hagiography with the important difference that the work must not omit the state of modern consciousness. For this reason, the first step consists in removing the film of dust and grime which, in the course of time, has settled on the figures of the Saints. In this way the original colours will begin to shine forth once more in their proper light. This work of restoration, of showing the paintings to the world again, is an extremely uncanny business which almost enters the sphere of necromancy. The hagiographer, to do this work, is obliged to contemplate the Saints for a long time in order to appreciate accurately their unusual conduct, and to be able to wait, with great patience, until they deem him worthy of their confidence. Only when the Saints have spoken directly with him—and this often happens suddenly, and without warning—can they be portrayed in a lifelike manner. It is as though they had to be, as it were, on the same footing, and walk in step with them; as though they had to speak those eternal words which otherwise would not be known to men, and which we cannot find in any other books.

If it conforms to this personal experience hagiography cannot be compared with normal historical writing. The magic world of the Saints cannot possibly be described with that dispassionate coolness which men have attributed to the work of the sixteenth century goldsmiths. Hagiography demands a quality of divination, which has something that is more than human in its intuitive understanding of the Saints. Justice can only be done to the Saint by a religious understanding, since this springs from a soil similar to that which gave rise to the Saint himself. The religious quality can only be comprehended by the religious quality. Every other description of it is superficial. The world of the Saints can only be understood together with God, and never without Him. To all other attempts to understand them their secret remains unrevealed, although, of course, it would be an exaggeration to say that only a Saint should write the life of a Saint. To wish to portray the Saints without their holiness does not call for any new religious interpretation: the perception of them is within the power of Christians of all sects and denominations.

The first requisite for the proper understanding of a Saint is to set aside that adoration which is not to be confused with specious apologies or with impertinent admiration. By putting an end to this adoration we see in the Saints the great lovers of Church history, who deserve not a little reproof, since adoration is not suited to the experience of love. The secret of the Saints is revealed only to the hagiographer who meets them with genuine love, which turns out also to be the real key with which to open the locked doors. Only if we truly love a person is that person's inmost nature laid bare to us. On the plea of love the new hagiography does not hesitate to write with manifest enthusiasm about its heroes of whom it has received

an enduring impression. Ernst Hello's *Heiligengestalten*, and Hugo Ball's *Byzantinisches Christentum* are the first indications of this new enthusiasm for the Saints. The note of inspired love belongs to genuine hagiography, which never is restricted to a material exposition of a little known sphere, but always aspires to the moulding of mankind.

No inner contradiction to this loving reverence is implicit in religious realism, by which name the new hagiography is known, in distinction to the traditional writings of the lives of the Saints. All portrayals of Saints are in perpetual danger of interpreting events in the light of the Saint's glory, and depicting him as utterly unblemished, while the very slightest stain on his character is expunged. From this there necessarily arises a false idealisation which gives the impression of the tendentious literature associated with propaganda, and which runs counter to the truth. Only a child could believe every single act and word to have been fully justified. Saints, moreover, are men, and man's imperfections cling to them. Nor has anyone emphasised this more strongly than they have themselves. To gloss over the shadows which, too, lie across their lives is certainly not the concern of genuine love, since we are fully able to feel a profound love for a person, and yet disapprove of some of his acts. Mention of their faults, however, not only springs from spitefulness—which is substantiated by the very act of unmasking them—but also serves to show that the Saints were no different from other men. Yet this is a miserable attitude, and contains not an element of truth. Saints are greater than ordinary men. The emphasis laid on the other side of the picture is purely the result of a love of truth and a sense of realistic adjustment, which often clearly indicates the sore dangers that so frequently beset the Saint. The victory over their baser natures, which they achieve after a hard struggle, is a greater tribute to their honour than the improbable acceptance of the belief that they have never known any temptations at all. With what frankness has Augustine, in his autobiography, described his entanglements with sin! And the new hagiography, too, must cultivate this realistic honesty. Only when it truthfully describes, according to the facts, how the Saints too have had to fight with the powers of darkness, and by no means always been victorious, can the portrayal of them rise to a genuinely moving account of the reality of their lives. This religious realism, which sees the Divine inside and not outside the realm of reality, presents the counterweight necessary to offset that ecstatic radiance which is a characteristic of the Saint's life.

Another consequence of this realism is the use of criticism in hagiography. The justice of the critical method, in which the passion for the truth has not infrequently ended in the destruction of its supporters, is beyond all question. In presenting the Saints there is, moreover, yet another task: that of clearing away the many climbing plants which have so often grown all over their figures. Countless weeds must be ruthlessly cut down if the essential picture is to appear before us again. There are, nevertheless, certain limits imposed on the critical method when used in the field of hagiography, which must not be overlooked. Saints are like lyric poetry,

which cannot be dissected analytically without losing its perfume. Just as anything of a contentious nature must be kept away from them, so must we be careful not to attempt to take them to pieces. For the non-observance of this truth the ingenious book by E. Busse-Wilson on *The Life of Saint Elizabeth* offers a most instructive paradigm, which, despite its imposing human understanding, ends up by destroying completely the figure of the Saint. The critical method is derived from the world of rational thought, which is cut off from the symbolic conception of the world by an unbridgeable gulf. Nearly all the Saint traditions are interwoven with legends in which the credible and the incredible are strangely intermingled. In the histories of the Saints the separation of fact from fiction can never be complete. The legends should never be written off beforehand as being of inferior worth and profit: the more so since they are descended from that same circle in which the Saint himself moved. In this respect, everlasting praise is due to Herder, who was one of the first to turn again to the significance of legends. But we have to learn to distinguish between legends and legends. There are legendary accounts which, allegorically, give an excellent impression of the significance of the Saint, and are often far superior to the inner truth of all historical traditions. Legends have the greatest importance in symbolic thinking. Nor is there any reason to take exception to the many wonderful events which are said to have filled the lives of the Saints. Many of the miracles, of course, bear the mark of the inventions with which men have sought to embellish the legends of the Saints, and they are often worthless from the religious viewpoint. Yet even so, there is certainly no Saint whose life does not stretch into the realm of wonder. Saints without supernatural happenings are not Saints. It is impossible to depict them without encountering the inexplicable. And fear of wonderful miracles is, after all, as foolish as having a passion for them, and neither pays any regard to the sense of metarealism.

Instead of invariably displaying the Saints in judgment on the world, true hagiography is based on gaining a new insight into them. This will lead into a new consciousness of them, although we must be prepared to follow along unfamiliar paths. Only this spiritual exploration can take a man's heart further, and prevent it from rotting in its case. In the world of the Saints the most strange and unheard of things appear, which should lead us to a new understanding. It is worth while trying to understand the strangest events, and not to capitulate too quickly in the face of the most puzzling of riddles. As scarcely anywhere else, hagiography determines how far, with courage and readiness, one may advance into religious reality, or whether one's spiritual virtue is to be denied new revelations.

Yet, for however long the new hagiography may revolve round the Saints, their inmost secret will never be fathomed. It remains unsoundable. We can never come to the end with the Saints, since their greatest depth cannot be expressed in words. Anyone who writes about Saints must always suffer the same painful experience as the pastor of Angela of Foligno, who recorded her divine revelations in the lucid speech which she used in her communications, and then, when he read through his tran-

scription to her, received the complaint: "I don't understand it at all now; it has no virtue written down, but it reminds me of what was said; alone it is so dark and does not convey the impression of the thing as I know it; you've written down the worst, and left out the best!" This is only an apparently incorrect judgment; rather does it clearly prove that the phenomenon of the Saint cannot be discussed conclusively on a theoretical plain. The most that we may say about the Saint amounts to no more than a mere stammering, and the most important thing is always to be read between the lines. Holiness can, at its best, assume visible forms, and for modern feelings, an unlegendary personality. To achieve the mediation of a vital impression, *one* holy man is not enough, even though he has stood in the clear light of events. No one Saint embodies all holiness. Rather does each Saint shed light on just one essential aspect, since he plainly mirrors one part of God's divine fire. From the whole host of Saints with their various forms must the picture of fullness be drawn: this will at least provide a worthy, lovable vision. The Saints are like chimes. Each bell has its own note, but only when they all ring together do we hear the full chime. We should hearken to this music of Eternity, in an age when men openly turn away from the Gospel. In this night of the suicide of the Western world, Christianity should heed that light which comes from the Saints, which sheds its radiance to each man on his way, and rouses within him again that restless longing for holiness, which Michael Baumgarten put into such prophetic words: "There are times when words and writings are of no avail to bring the urgent truth home to all. At such times the acts and sufferings of the Saints forge a new alphabet in order to reveal the secret of truth once more. Our present day is just such a time."<sup>13</sup>

## Francis of Assisi

1182—1226

### I

FRER MASSEO once went up to Francis and said, "Why you, of all men? Why you?" And Francis, in answer to this curious question, said, "What exactly do you mean?" "I want to know," went on Brother Masseo, "why it is that everyone runs after you; why they want to see you, to hear you, and to heed you. You are not a handsome man, nor are you particularly learned. And you are not a nobleman. Why, then, do they all run after you?"<sup>1</sup> We begin with this legendary conversation because it contains the secret of Francis himself. Why is this man of Assisi the greatest Saint Christianity has ever produced? What is it that still, even to-day, attracts us so much to him—an attraction from which we cannot free ourselves? How are we to interpret this remarkable man, and wherein lies the new message that he uttered? Yes, indeed, "*Why you?*"

Brother Masseo's question alludes to the inner riddle of Francis, which charms us by its singularity and its incredible strangeness. We become possessed by a dreadful uncertainty as soon as we begin to consider Francis impartially. His strangeness, which seems to arise from an underlying depth much greater than has hitherto been generally accepted, is not based solely on the essential differences which the rational, modern man feels between himself and the symbolic thinker of the Middle Ages. It is to be found, rather, in the personality of Francis: a personality to which Christianity gave expression in its highest form. It is easy to describe men like Thomas Aquinas or Martin Luther; but we can hardly define Francis of Assisi, who was a man almost impossible of definition. We can only remotely guess at his secret. The stressing of his puzzling singularity in no way detracts from his greatness; quite the reverse, for Francis becomes even more unfathomable if we consider only the indications we have of him which survive from the past, than if we try to study him in detail, without taking into account that dangerous audacity of his, which conforms so well to the ideas of modern Christianity. It never occurred to Francis himself to discard his impenetrability; for he accentuated rather than mitigated it. "Although he could not remain completely silent about the greatness of the Heavenly love with which he was filled, yet he spoke of it cautiously; and then, only in riddles."<sup>2</sup> Curious indeed are the contradictory characteristics to be found in Francis: the indulgent mildness, which embraced everything with its ineffable love, and, at the same time, the bitter strength, which in him became a terrifying hardness. It is necessary to underline both these sides of his character—the tenderness

and the inflexibility—because only if they are taken together do they explain the disturbing phenomenon of his nature. Were we to follow only one line, it would necessarily give us a one-sided portrait; whereas the peculiarity of Francis' personality—not easily to be grasped—lies in the living dialectics of both antitheses.

Francis' strange mysteriousness was felt by his immediate contemporaries, and consequently they regarded him with speechless amazement. They were well-nigh overwhelmed by the Saint's almost revolutionary demeanour, which they were unable to fit into their mediaeval attitude towards life. They were filled with a feeling of terror and alienation when confronted by the Saint. "Oh, wondrous thing! Unheard of in our time! Who is there who does not stare in speechless amazement? Who has ever seen the like of this?"<sup>3</sup> The *Legenda Trium Sociorum*, too, refers to the "boundless amazement" in which Francis was held; so much so, that people would hasten to "see and hear him, as though he were a man from another century."<sup>4</sup> Despite the impossibility of solving the riddle, the "over-audacious Francis" had an irresistible power of attraction. "Whenever he visited a town the clergy would rejoice, the bells would ring, men would exult—and women share their gladness, and boys would gaily clap their hands, breaking branches off the trees, and singing as they ran to meet him."<sup>5</sup> He was described by his companions as "a new man from another world." The Sultan, even in the midst of the Crusades, received the same impression of Francis, and "considered him as a man, quite unlike any other."<sup>6</sup> After his death this admiration for Francis increased rather than diminished. According to Petrus Johannes Olivi, Francis was "truly the Angel who opened the sixth seal";<sup>7</sup> and, in the words of Dante, "a sun was born into the world."<sup>8</sup> Greater things can scarcely have been said of a man than these two judgments of Francis, uttered at a time when everyone was trying to put into words the indescribable impression he created.

The remarkable astonishment displayed by his contemporaries is a truer reflection of Francis' personality than the aesthetic viewpoint of to-day, which has merely neutralised the mysterious phenomenon instead of throwing light on it. During the last few decades the man of Assisi has been considered only in the light of *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*; and great pleasure has been derived from the enchanting perfume of this collection of legends. But as a result of this, Francis has been transformed into a poetic pantheist—to the delight of all aesthetes. They have emphasised the ingenuousness of the gentle Brother, "ever gay," who was able to solve, playfully, the difficulties of life. Francis has been depicted as a kind of glorified vagabond, who "dreamed the most beautiful dreams, to lull man's suffering to sleep."<sup>9</sup> And he has, above all, been heedlessly modernised in a way which completely ignores his mediaeval conduct. This "aestheticising" approach to Francis no doubt presents a charming picture of him—one which readily appeals to the emotions of modern man, and one, moreover, of which it is difficult to be rid, once we have accepted such a romantic view. Nevertheless it cannot be stated with too much

emphasis that this modern aesthetic view of Francis contains not a shred of historical accuracy. It is a charming misrepresentation, but has not the least connection with the earliest knowledge we have of him. The rigorous enmity which the Saint showed for the body is, in itself, a complete refutation of this insipid picture of Francis. Moreover, his attraction to Nature is based on premises completely different from those of the modern conception of Nature. The aesthetic interpretation of Francis is false in every respect: it cannot be seriously maintained, since it completely overlooks the immense virtue which breaks out from this Saint. It in no way solves the problem, "Why you?"

The answer to this question lies, rather, in just the opposite direction, and can only be explained by referring to his resemblance to Christ. That is the category in which we have to place this Life. This does not mean that Francis "appeared to men, almost as another Christ sent for the salvation of the world," as the *Little Flowers* puts it.<sup>10</sup> The Poverello himself would most certainly have condemned this description of him as sheer blasphemy. For him there was no "second Christ"; nor did he ever give himself out to be the Lord Who had come again. His mystical union with Christ, however, Whom he saw "in ecstasy, in ineffable and incomprehensible splendour,"<sup>11</sup> enabled his whole life to become a symbol of Christ, which alone can explain his secret to us. It fell to his lot to achieve the greatest likeness to Christ, and he restored the picture of Jesus' life again: this was at once noticed by his contemporaries. This likeness to Christ was, unfortunately, later treated much too systematically by Bartholomew of Pisa in his *On the Similarity between the Life of Saint Francis and the Life of our Lord Jesus*, the effect of which is too rigid and artificial. A correct view of this, however, soon destroys the unfortunate parallel, despite Luther's bad-temper and scorn, railing at Francis as a "coarse fellow." The Saint of Assisi was the symbol of Christ in the Middle Ages, and for this reason cannot be fitted into any rigid scheme of classification. "He had much in common with Jesus: he held Jesus in his heart, on his lips, in his ears, in his eyes, and in his hands, yea, throughout his whole being, constantly."<sup>12</sup> Francis' kinship with Christ needs to be continually reaffirmed. It strikes the observer at every step. Francis lived with Jesus as though they were contemporaries; as though he were one of His followers. He was always near Him. The Christmas celebration at Greccio is only one instance of how he was able to give new life to the Gospel story, so that his contemporaries were "able to behold it with their own eyes."<sup>13</sup> Scarcely anyone could help sharing in this visual experience, and in Francis they saw the perfect portrait of Christ. His life had become the life of Jesus. According to Guarini it was Francis' "exceptional grace, which reminded men of Jesus"; and it enabled him not only to reflect the Master like the other Saints, but to bring Him into the present, so that "the countenance of Christ Himself shone from his; and the gestures of Christ became incorporated in his own."<sup>14</sup> Francis made Christ intelligible with a reality which has never been surpassed. When we consider Francis we have to think of Christ, whether we want to or not. That is the greatest

miracle in the life of this Saint, and one which makes us cast aside all normal standards.

It is manifest that there can be no question of writing a learned thesis on this symbol of Christ. The result would be wholly inadequate. Francis was like lightning, illuminating the dark night of Christianity; and he was bound to kindle something in anyone who went near him. The man of Assisi felt called to be a new fool in the world; and so we can only depict him with a fool's love if we are not to be untrue to him. He was one of God's minstrels, and so we must sing of him as gaily as the larks he loved so well. Is this just foolish and absurd? No matter. For this, and nothing else, was Francis. That is precisely why his life possessed that inimitable lustre which can no more be captured than a ray of sunlight. We can only conjure up single pictures of his unique existence; but, fundamentally, they all say the same thing. How remote is this mysterious symbol of Christ from the present day, and yet how closely does he affect us! When we are really able to understand the absolute difference of his way of life, there rises up an unknown Francis, whose figure, alternately hidden and revealed, looms up through the Rembrandtesque light and shade, and suddenly vanishes away again.

## II

Francis begins his autobiographical *Testament* with a most remarkable statement: "God gave me, Brother Francis, this beginning, by way of expiation. For while I was still in a state of sin, it seemed a bitter thing to look on lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them; and I had compassion on them. And when I departed from them, what had seemed bitter was transformed into spiritual and bodily sweetness. And I did not tarry long, but forsook worldliness."<sup>15</sup> This restrained self-analysis needs to be considered sentence by sentence. It rings with the harmony which underlies the life of this Saint: a life which begins in such earnest and ends with such inner joy.

Francis spoke harshly of his youth when he said "while I was still in a state of sin." From his own lips we do not learn of a single adventurous dream of fame and honour, nor one syllable about that noble knightliness in which his youthful years were spent. All such stories about him originate solely from the desire to represent Francis' youth in the brightest possible light, so that he, too, in his worldly years, should have nothing unseemly with which to reproach himself. As a contrast to this false glorification of his youth, we may turn to Celano's *Life*, in which the Saint is shown as having "lamentably lost and wasted his time, up to his twenty-fifth year."<sup>16</sup> This, the earliest report of a misspent youth, is in complete agreement with Francis' own utterances on the subject. The Saint had ruthlessly put the first half of his life behind him, and it is of minor importance whether he squandered his youthful years in houses of ill fame, and was better or worse than other young men; or whether he occupied himself with warlike plans, in the hope of advancing his personal status. From the

religious point of view, both these abuses are equally vain, since unbridled ambition is as much a vice as debauchery. Francis was not interested in such nice distinctions. He looked upon this period of his life as lost, as something which he could only regret; and he could find only one word to describe it: sin. There is therefore no question of burdening Francis' youthful years, in order to enhance the greatness of his later life. It is enough to state the simple truth: that the son of Bernadone, too, knew the path of idle vanity, and that his perfection was certainly not the result of always following along the same easy road.

His life of sin was arrested by the unexpected intervention of God. With the words, "God gave me," Francis announced the great turning-point. Coming from his lips, such a statement is no thoughtless figure of speech; it points to the supernatural powers by means of which alone Francis can be understood. He could not conceive the drastic transformation in his life as arising from worldly causes. And without accepting the manifest intervention of God in the self-centred life of the young Francis, none of the unusual things which befell him can possibly be explained. "The hand of God came upon him,"<sup>17</sup> and effected his transformation—which is still too little studied, and which bears no comparison with an ordinary conversion. If we fail to place the sentence, "God gave me," at the beginning of Francis' Christlike life, we are bound to miss the proper starting-point, however ingeniously we may subsequently discourse on the Poverello. Francis was naturally a typical Italian, and his vivacity was such that even before the Cardinals he moved his feet as though dancing. In the same way, it is important not to divorce the events of his life from the national temperament, or from the Umbrian landscape, with its sky of unending blue.<sup>18</sup> There have been many men with a Southerner's temperament, but there has only been one Francis in the history of Christianity. The cloth-merchant's son never stressed his Italian origin, and his contemporaries never saw in him a reflection of their national characteristics. Neither can his vague connection with Frankish Provence, which has been put forward, and to which he owed the name of Francis, bring any more light to bear than do the suggested influences of the Waldensians, about which the available sources remain silent. None of these natural explanations, however, accounts for the supernatural element in his life. The arguments, instead of being fundamentally metaphysical—in accordance with Francis' own way of thinking—are superficially empirical, and therefore a contradiction of his own conception. For him, the transformation in his life began with an incomprehensible gift from God, which had the effect of diverting him from his original course. The Saint laid the greatest weight on the co-ordination of the decisive turning-point which led him back to God, and the confirmation of his existence as the result of a direct revelation by God.

In Francis' own words: "God gave me this beginning, by way of expiation." From thenceforward the Poverello invariably conceived Christianity as a means of communicating existence, and not as an intellectual problem. It was this first, significant realisation, which gave

such bright colours to his understanding of the Gospels; and it is a most remarkable fact that this self-revelation should have been ignored. It was not in Francis to lead a free and easy-going sort of life. Such a linear outline of him leads to a fatal misunderstanding. Behind him lay a wasted youth, and he deeply regretted it. He must atone. Jesus' exhortation, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand," had reached him, too. The apparently carefree young man from Assisi belongs to the great penitents in the history of the Christian religion; and these deserve to be examined anew. Nobody nowadays understands what it means to be a penitent, and no one has any idea of the monsters that sported in the depths of those tortured souls. Dostoevsky was one of the last to know about these things, and for this reason he was recognised as a penitent by the Staretz Ambrosii. Francis' life, too, stood under the sign of ceaseless reparation for his past faults. The Poverello regarded his whole life as an uninterrupted penitence, and not just the first few months of his regeneration. The message that he must atone was an integral part of his whole life. And it was also the focal point of his later preaching. His God-ordained penitence was expressed by the asceticism which he observed with saintly fanaticism, and which led him along that path whose end cannot be seen.

The first practical act of Francis' ascetic penance was his meeting with the lepers. Lepers had always inspired the greatest horror and revulsion in him. The sight of their putrescent limbs aroused such repugnance in him, that he found it bitter indeed to have to look on them. And even less could the well-bred young man tolerate their appalling stench. Yet the youthful Francis did not, as most people in the Middle Ages did, regard leprosy as a "holy disease": he merely experienced the greatest horror when he was confronted by the sufferers. He made a point of avoiding them, and would hold his nose between his finger and thumb whenever he saw one—even at a distance of two miles. This horror is quite understandable, for the sight of these ghastly figures beggars description. It happened, then, that Francis was riding alone one day in the vicinity of Assisi, when he came on one of these wretched creatures, who at once aroused in him the usual feelings of disgust. He was on the point of turning back, when he hesitated, shuddered a little, decided to overcome his aversion, and dismounted. In this new situation, Francis had the feeling that "the Lord Himself had led him thither"; and he was filled with compassion, and gave his purse to the man so sorely stricken by God. But this was not enough. Something even more unexpected happened. Overcoming his revulsion, he suddenly embraced the leper, and "kissed him" with true Gothic ardour.<sup>19</sup> When we pause to consider this, we hardly dare to breathe. But thanks to his almost superhuman self-control, Francis had already been caught up in the whirl of cosmic life, and won the first victory over himself, discovering, at the same time, that it was one of the happiest experiences of his life. Exploiting this painfully achieved self-denial, he repaired a few days later to the lazaret, washed the pus from the suppurating sores of the sick men with his own hands, and forced himself, once more, not to be repelled by their evil-smelling decay, and "to kiss

their hands and lips.”<sup>20</sup> This touching the lepers with his lips, which all the old sources specifically mention, in no way indicates a pathological leaning on the part of the Saint. It does, however, lay low, at one blow, all false, sentimental enthusiasm for Francis. Admittedly this kiss, given in the most irresponsible manner, courted infection, and did absolutely nothing towards healing the sick man; but then it was not given with that end in view. It was much more a mark of penitence, and of the new religious outlook which later inspired Francis to call the lepers “our brothers in Christ.” He saw in them the hidden Lord. The kiss, which would otherwise be a repulsive business, can only be understood in this way. In any case, from this moment onwards, the figure swathed in rags, its face and limbs eaten away by leprosy, became part of Francis’ life, and could no longer be separated from him. The kiss assumed the greatest significance for him, and later on in life he thought of “returning into the service of the lepers.”<sup>21</sup> We are forcibly made aware of the puzzling strangeness of Francis—to which we have already referred—in the face of this episode. It is difficult for a modern man to co-ordinate it with his own natural feelings. And yet we can only gaze, spellbound, at the “compassion which he bore to them.” In any case, we can only come closer to Francis if we are prepared, spiritually, to tread as he did the hard path to the nauseating lepers. This is the first narrow gate through which we must pass if we would, in real earnest, come to know this Saint, and if any quickening virtue is to be released.

Of this devoted penance with the lepers was born a singular fruit. Francis himself has already spoken of its incomparable value: “And when I departed from them, what had seemed bitter was transformed into spiritual and bodily sweetness.” This is an eternal truth, which remains ever constant. True self-denial is never unrewarded. At the very moment when Francis won his first victory over himself, something happened to him—something quite inconceivable, something which confuses all our conceptions, something which is only to be found in the lives of the Saints. A transformation had taken place! Not by any device of magic—not by the trick of some conjurer—but in a blaze of illumination: *the bitterness within him was transformed into sweetness*. Francis is the greatest example of transformation. With him, what had stood on the right, now stood on the left; and everything about him took on a new aspect. The complete reversal—one cannot conceive one more drastic—took place in all that he had ever experienced. This transformation of bitterness into sweetness is a true marvel, a wonder, and not just a strange miracle. What he had previously found lovely, now repelled him; and what had previously filled him with horror, now became a source of boundless joy. Everything was seized in the grip of the Divine alchemy by means of which Francis had rediscovered one of the deepest virtues of the Gospel. Gospel is transformation. When we can understand this joyous secret, we are also able to understand the hidden law which underlies the life of Francis. As a result of this wondrous transformation, the new melody began to ring out through his life—a melody which was never to depart from him, and which





would echo through him like a refrain. He spoke of sweetness, and in doing so, clearly showed that he had experienced the Gospel, right from the beginning, as something rich, magnificent, and lovely—not as a morose and sullen thing. What “drew Francis away from the world to God, was the sweetness, which, from the very outset, flowed into him so wholly that it never left him throughout his lifetime.”<sup>22</sup> The whole of Francis’ new life is the result of this transformation of bitterness into sweetness, before which one can only stand in amazement. If we do not take this into account, his life becomes nothing more than a quite remarkable psychological item of fact, and is no longer the mediaeval symbol of Christ. Francis was a penitent—an ardent penitent. But he did not practise in darkness, since throughout the course of his ascetic penance the transformation of bitterness into sweetness shone like a light from Heaven. From this event arises the triumphant serenity which surrounds the figure of Francis like an aura. And this has seduced many modern observers into noticing only his sweet-toned joy, so that they overlook the expiatory penitence which was constantly at work within him. Such an attitude gives a false picture of Francis; for his sweetness only came to him through the transmutation of bitterness. His serenity did not spring from any natural disposition. It was founded on transubstantiation, and for this very reason, cannot be emulated by such refined methods. It is a Divine mystery, which eludes all attempts to grasp it, and which is only revealed to religious men. Francis came into contact with this transforming strength, by following the existential advice of God: “Seize the spiritual, in place of the vain and idle things of this world, which thou hast loved; take the bitter in place of the sweet; learn to scorn thyself, if thou wouldst know Me: for what I shall say to thee shall make thee wise, even in a strange manner.”<sup>23</sup> The Saint of Assisi’s serenity is the result of the hardest won victory over self that a man could possibly accomplish; and thanks to this—and only thanks to this—was he granted that unending, rich experience—in praise of which all men’s hymns are too few, however lyrical their measure—so that in him “the bitterness was transformed into spiritual and bodily sweetness.”

After this grand prelude, Francis could no longer continue in his former state. He “did not tarry long, but forsook worldliness,” taking the path of the Saints, which was to lead him on to experiences more wondrous still.

### III

Francis’ new life did not raise him “at once to the highest peaks: on the contrary, the flesh had to be transformed gradually into the spirit.”<sup>24</sup> Only by a long process of development did he reach “greatness from smallness.”<sup>25</sup> This gradual struggle for perfection is to be seen in the graded pattern of his life’s ascent.

“Next,” continues Francis, in his autobiographical *Testament*, “God gave me such confidence in the Church, that I prayed quite simply, saying: We pray to Thee, Lord Jesus Christ, here and in all Thy churches through-

out the world; and we bless Thee, because Thou hast redeemed the world through Thy Holy Cross."<sup>26</sup> In the course of a prayer such as this, Francis had a vision of Christ in the half-ruined little church of St. Damian. Visions are secret things, which cannot be fully seen with the inquisitive glance of a mere spectator. To understand them one needs, rather, a sixth sense, which will not look on visions as subjective hallucinations, but as manifestations of God in the soul of man, corresponding to an objective substance. Kneeling before the Crucifix, the Poverello was "powerfully moved by unusual spiritual visitations," in which he heard a Voice, saying, "Go to, Francis, go to; and build my House, which, as thou seest, is fallen into ruin."<sup>27</sup> Filled with fearful wonder, the Saint trembled, and such was his awe that he could find no words to utter. And Celano, too, thought it better to remain silent about this apparition of Christ. The biographer simply makes the following observation: "From that moment, his heart was gentled, for the Beloved had spoken to him. And now did his soul awaken to love, by reason of the Wounds. From thenceforth, he did not restrain his tears, but proclaimed the sufferings of Christ in a loud voice, as though he always had Him before his eyes."<sup>28</sup> There is no reason to cast any doubt on this vision of Christ, purely because Celano related it in the augmented *Life* only, and not in his first biography. Francis was a visionary who, later on, often fell into ecstasies; and his relationship to Jesus far surpassed any normal faith. The meaning of this first vision of Christ lies in its being the first appearance of the figure of Jesus in his actual life. Christ had entered his existence, and not merely by the ordinary way of baptism in childhood, as is the case with other men. Jesus swept with the mighty rush of a whirlwind into his life, changing everything from its very foundations. And afterwards, when Francis spoke of Christ, his words were no longer of that debased coinage which leaves the listener indifferent. To him, the mythical background of Jesus was real; and it is *this* which gives us the key to an understanding of his personality. His roots lie in this visionary relationship to Christ. Just as all conceptions of Francis which are not prefaced with that mighty *God gave me* are without foundation, so also are all views of him which overlook, or treat as of secondary importance, the preordained direction of his existence through Christ. The basic axiom of any interpretation of Francis must be: the Saint of Assisi is only to be understood through Jesus. The life of this man was founded on the figure of Jesus to such an exalted degree that no higher ascent was possible. By Him was he entrusted with a task. Francis cannot be understood without the figure of Jesus, into Whose image his whole life had been transformed. Of all whose lives have been centred in Jesus, Francis was the mightiest who has yet arisen in human history.

Out of the relationship of Francis to Christ a frequently misinterpreted truth comes to light. For him, too, as for the Church, Christ was the exalted Lord: yet this definition does not cover the whole state of affairs. Francis was one of the few Christians who, led by his great intuitive gifts, held much more to the Gospels than to the Epistles of St. Paul. This unobtrusive, and consequently almost unnoticed, endeavour was a most

significant portent, which was followed by great things, since from it there arose once more, in Francis, that original relationship to Christ which had fallen into oblivion ever since the days of the early Church's controversies over matters of dogma. Just as St. Paul once wrote, "Yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more," so did Francis, as opposed to the Convert, wish to know his Lord in the flesh also. Not only the transfigured Jesus, but also the humiliated Lord was of importance to him. And what had scarcely happened at all for centuries was accomplished by Francis: the Jesus of the Gospels lived again through him. Through him, moreover, something completely overwhelming came to light again, with the result that to Francis the death and resurrection of Jesus were no longer the focal point. It was the whole life of Jesus, as it is told in the Gospels, which was of significance to him. The Saint of Assisi disinterred the life of Jesus from its dust and ashes, and, in the process, his own life took on that evangelical beauty which charms us like a new day of Creation. It was an achievement which has been too little acclaimed. It is something which can only be placed in the category of the Visions. It is as though Christ had actually descended from the Cross during the passion of the Saint's prayer, and entered straight into the Poverello's life! This is something incomprehensible, for which there are not adequate words; moreover, whatever we say has a piteous ring about it, and gives a wrong picture of this blazing fire. For Francis, Jesus was no figure of antiquity. He was a living reality, Who distressed him by night and by day. Francis stood in a mysterious relationship to Jesus, and in the light of this mysticism in Christ, which in him assumed its most exalted form, all his activities are to be understood. Paradoxically, Francis found himself in a mythical proximity to Jesus, in which no historical lapse of time existed. In him the synoptic Jesus had taken on a Form again; and such an immense Manifestation is scarcely to be met with at any other time in history, either before or after Francis. Even the glowing mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux was far surpassed.

Francis was not long in applying his intellect to the subject matter of his first vision of Christ: the state of the decayed Church in which he found himself. He did not view his task with regard to the Church as a whole, which, despite its outward splendour, was indeed in a grievous state. But as a practical result of his visionary command, he began repairing the church of St. Damian, wherein, ever since his visit to the lepers, his new vocation lay. So the Saint of Assisi set to work on the restoration of the tumble-down church, and tirelessly carried stones and plaster to and fro, as though he had been a true mason. Neither weariness nor torn clothes turned him from his purpose. Zealously did he repair the damage to the church, and as a consequence, gave up working in his father's cloth business; and, eventually, he was never seen again in the house of his parents.

This reprehensible conduct brought the conflict, already latent between himself and his enraged father, to an open break. Francis' call to Jesus was thus weighed down by a painful difference of opinion with his own father.

The bitter struggle between the two men reached its climax before the Episcopal Court at Assisi. We have only to reflect for a little on this situation, in order to appreciate its intense drama. It reminds us of Virgil's *Sunt lachrymae rerum*. And it is one of the most moving scenes in the life of the Saint, when Francis, in reply to the paternal reproach of ingratitude, "promptly stripped off all his clothes, and threw them down at his father's feet. He did not even keep his hose, but stood exposed in all his nakedness to everyone there."<sup>29</sup> The naked Francis, standing in the square of Assisi, is, like the Poverello kissing the leper, an unusual and an irritating picture, which, at first glance, horrifies and yet is strangely attractive. It contains a deep-rooted symbolism, which cannot be understood if we are merely morally outraged by his nakedness. Francis, by this act of his, renounced his heritage, and ruthlessly cut himself off from all the family ties which had previously existed between himself and his nearest kindred. To part thus from his own father, and to trample his own natural feelings under foot, was no easy matter for him; and Francis found it to be one of the most painful experiences of his life. The irreparable breach with his parents was a step which he was able to achieve only after the deepest inner struggles, of which we dare speak only with bated breath. For did not he, too, know the commandment, "Honour thy father and thy mother"? And must it not have lain heavily upon his conscience, that he should have begun his new life with a manifest breaking of this commandment? But it was Jesus Who was now the ordaining strength in his life: Jesus, Who had Himself once uttered the terrible words, "For I came to set a man at variance against his father . . . He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me . . ." These words, when not minimised, point to the whole importance implicit in the appearance of Jesus; and the fact that Francis did not hesitate to obey them shows that he was by no means the dreamy, poetic youth so often depicted to us. Deep down within him was a hard iron core of resolution, and when he received a command from Jesus, no timid reflections could divert him from his path. Francis, outwardly so gentle, was capable of immense harshness, since, being a man of the utmost seriousness, he always went to the furthest extremes in his activities.

Francis' separation from his father must not be taken as an isolated example: we must try to discover the chief significance of his break away from society. Francis lived at a time remarkable for the rise of urban culture; but his endeavours cannot be brought into line with the social upheavals of the century. He took no part in the beautification of life and the colouring of the new culture, which were then in progress. It would be a great mistake to represent Francis as one of the creators of the Renaissance, for he stood quite apart from the material achievements of the Italian cities. His unmistakable contempt for cultural life is shown by Francis "on the occasion when the Emperor Otto rode through the neighbourhood with great pomp and circumstance, in order to have the crown of world-rule set upon his head. The holy father, with some others, remained in a house of the street through which the procession was to pass,

and did not even go out of doors to look: he only allowed one man to take a message to the Emperor, telling him that this renown would be of but short duration."<sup>80</sup> No greater disdain for worldly culture could be found than this impressive behaviour of Francis' towards the Emperor. The Poverello, therefore, can in no way be regarded as representative of his age: in fact he was very much less representative of his time than has been generally supposed. Nor had he anything in common with Frederick II, that illustrious figure of a mediaeval emperor. Rather was Francis his direct antithesis. It is impossible to place them both in the same category, since each is a definite contradiction of the other.<sup>81</sup> With the memorable scene in the market-place at Assisi, Francis had consciously cut himself off from society. There was no return for him, for he had burned all the bridges behind him. From then on he was a non-social figure, using the word in its timeless sense. Francis had thrown down the gauntlet to society with an almost challenging gesture. Having questioned the premises of its institutions, he determined to allow himself no further compromise for the rest of his life. This Francis, withdrawn from the mediaeval order of society, is a man of unique greatness. By abandoning the feudal, moneyed aristocracy, Francis had not only denied his own century, he had dissolved, once and for all, the bond between Christianity and culture, so characteristic of the Middle Ages. In him Christianity turned once more against culture, as at the time of its origin. This is the second narrow gate through which it is not easy for a modern man to pass for in his case the question is seen differently, and his last longing for fulfilment fades away. We must understand what this means, if we are to affirm Francis; for his life poses one of the deepest problems. It is not an easy thing to renounce art, science, and culture. Yet we would be wrong to think that Francis simply strode out into the void: he is still one of the most positive figures of world history, and he never uttered a renunciation simply for renunciation's sake. It was quite consciously that he renounced his gift for polemics, which, according to Sabatier, constituted one of his most powerful assets.<sup>82</sup> Everything with him issued from a positive, and never from a negative. When Francis denied himself, he did so for the sake of something greater; and what he lost of visible worth, through his renunciation, he gained in religious resolution. Moreover, in the matter of culture, his action showed the truth of the words, "Whosoever will lose his life for my sake, shall find it . . ."

When he broke with society, Francis took a decisive step towards poverty. The ideal of poverty was by no means unknown to mediaeval piety, but the Poverello did not follow in the traditional path. He took this step as an expression of his personal development; and it led him to a completely new mode of conduct. Francis was destined to poverty: yet he had no romantic enthusiasm for it, since he appreciated it as an inner splendour. Furthermore, as a solution to social questions, his acceptance of poverty concerned him only inasmuch as it portrayed a radical Christian attempt to remove, individually, a difficult problem from the world. His choice of poverty—which runs contrary to all man's natural instincts—

transcends the social question, and has nothing at all to do with the modern attempt at solution, which endeavours to distribute the same possessions in a different way, ignoring its demoniac essence. The acceptance of poverty is in the most violent opposition to the efforts of the greedy, acquisitive men, whose illusions Francis had seen through completely. His decision sprang purely from religious motives. For long the beggar, to whom he had never refused alms, had filled Francis' heart with compassion. His aim now was that he should himself become this poor beggarman: he himself, who had renounced everything of his own free will. Francis regarded the poor in the same way as he regarded lepers: as men who wore Christ, and who drew their nobility from the Lord Himself. "If you see a poor man, then you must see in him Him in Whose name he comes, namely, Christ, Who has taken upon Himself our poverty and our weakness. For a poor man's weakness and poverty are as a mirror to us, in which we should, in piety, behold the weakness and the poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who, in His love, has suffered them for our own salvation."<sup>33</sup> It was on these grounds that Francis himself wished to be counted among the poor; for Jesus, too, was poor, and had no place whereon to lay His head.

Francis' burning love of poverty was purely religious. He speaks of holy poverty: and, indeed, for Francis poverty, fully experienced, belonged to the realms of mysticism. This is why the abstract conception of poverty was to him a female, with whom he entered into marriage. "It was his highest approach to perfection, and he embraced poverty with all the ardour of his love. Since God's Son had Himself been poor, Francis wished to be wedded in unending love to her from whom all other men fled. He loved her so dearly that he clave unto her more strongly than to a wife; for he was in perfect unity with her in the spirit, having abandoned not only father and mother, but all else as well. He embraced her in chastity, and wished for nothing more than to be her true spouse."<sup>34</sup> Modern man must remain almost speechless in the face of this Eros-like example, for it shows that Francis made no new law of mystical poverty—which would, anyway, have been contrary to the Gospel. The erotic relationship of Francis to poverty was so intense that it borders on sensuality, while it was, at the same time, sublimated to such a degree that there is hardly any parallel in the history of Christianity. No husband could embrace his wife with more passionate love than that which Francis bore to his beloved bride, Poverty. He spoke of her with such tenderness, and with such inner feeling, that it seemed as if he were caressing a beautiful figure of flesh and blood, with whom he was living in unbridled and indescribable ecstasy. Francis and Lady Poverty were as a pair of lovers, intertwined. Anyone—even to-day—who does not stand in awe before this mystery, must for ever remain blind to the reality of the figure of Francis of Assisi. The mystical marriage with Lady Poverty allows us, too—without any false attributions—to understand Francis' exposure of his nakedness, regarding which only Mereshkovsky has so far made any serious reflections.<sup>35</sup> At the lawsuit with his father, Francis stripped him-

self naked before the bishop; and he desired to be laid out naked on the earth at his death. These are substantiating symbols, just as the marriage with Poverty was—which had reached the height of a true marriage, and let fall the last remaining veils. Moreover, since Francis was bound in wedlock to his exalted mistress, he could not permit his love for her to be shared by anyone else; and he therefore watched with a jealous eye, to ensure that no one else was poorer than himself.

We find ourselves faced with a phenomenon which can hardly be described in words. Here is a married man, who possessed nothing, who could no longer call anything his own, and yet was free of all burdens! How easy it was for him, and how different must he have felt from other men. He had become like the fowls of the air in the Gospel, of whom Jesus said, "They sow not, neither do they reap . . . yet your Heavenly Father feedeth them." Francis had achieved that freedom in the Gospel of which Jesus had spoken: "Take no thought for your life." The Poverello had cast off the fetters with which property manacles men, and had entered the country of wondrous freedom. "Both within and without himself, he was free from everything,"<sup>36</sup> his companions claimed. He really did breathe the air of Paradise, and was one of the first to enter the atmosphere of bliss. One cannot help thinking of Buddha, who climbed to similar heights. The anxiety of life, which so often terrorises men, had left him altogether. Not even a speck of dust could trouble him any longer. He had cast everything from him, and in doing so won everything. Poverty was to him no bitter sorrow, in whose constricting grasp he groaned, but the very happiest of necessities, and one which made him exult. Never was any man freer or richer than this penniless pauper; and this is why we must include Francis among the greatest heroes of religious freedom—a fact which is usually overlooked. A freedom such as his is different from the freedom of spirit which is so dear to modern man; but the freedom from the idolatry of possession, which the Saint achieved, is no less important, and must be put on the same level as the freedom of belief and of conscience. Freedom from all bonds of property is an especial happiness, which can only be enjoyed by one who has passed through bitterness to sweetness. Not for nothing did this really free man make his way singing from the episcopal court after the lawsuit. When bystanders would have interrupted the almost euphoric chanting, which seemed to spring from his whole personality, Francis, radiant with joy, replied, "I am the herald of a great King."<sup>37</sup> That this should be the first self-description of Francis is no mere coincidence. He really was a new herald of God, and was destined to bring to the unseeing world the blissful message of true freedom, born of his true religious poverty. This message worked like a magnet, and was not peculiar to the Poverello only in the ecstatic moment of transfiguration, when he achieved freedom from possessions. The force of his feelings allowed him to pour forth his message throughout his whole life, as though he were an inexhaustible beaker, constantly filled to overflowing.

To other men, who witnessed this event outwardly and not inwardly, Francis' behaviour gave the impression that he was a fool. They called him *pazzo*, and laughed at him. "Everything that he did they took for madness and insanity."<sup>38</sup> In their eyes Francis was a lunatic, and he himself encouraged this opinion. He deliberately behaved like a fool in the eyes of the world, and in so doing he brought to light one of the most fundamental secrets of early Christianity. He paid absolutely no attention to the ridicule of some, and he considered it quite in order for others to upbraid him as *stultus*. For God had specifically commanded him to "be a fool in this world";<sup>39</sup> and he intended to carry out the task.

The holy, divine folly possessed the particular property of being contagious; and, despite his simplicity, Francis, during a lifetime which was unusual in every way, exercised an irresistible power of attraction over many men. First one, then others, came to associate themselves with him, and to share his poor, if free, mode of living. Francis would immediately demand the condition that they should sell all their goods, and the money realised be distributed among the poor. His existence now began to function as a communal experience which grew, without his intending it, into something superpersonal. The Poverello was overjoyed at this union, although it soon became embarrassing. The problem of his neighbour began to assume very serious proportions, since it placed, from the first, a weighty responsibility on his shoulders. He did not know exactly how to start with his followers. In his *Testament* he has written, "After the Lord had sent me brothers, nobody showed me what path I was to follow."<sup>40</sup> Nobody—this includes the Church. Catholics have always noticed how Francis "was guided least of all in his religious ideas by that quarter whence we would most confidently have expected such a lead to come, namely, the clergy."<sup>41</sup> Clerical advice was completely lacking at the time of Francis' decisive beginning. He was thrown back entirely on himself, and had, alone, to determine exactly what he would do with his brothers. So he went his own way with striking independence; and in his new freedom he trusted to no leadership by man, but subjected himself only to the will of God.

It was in the year 1209 that Francis found himself once more in a church. The priest had read the adjuration to the Apostles, in which Jesus said: "And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give. Provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses. Nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves . . ." These words struck the listening Francis like a flash of lightning. At the end of the service he begged the priest to enlighten him a little more on this chapter. Twice Francis listened in silence to the pregnant apostolic discourse, and word by word the poignancy of its meaning took possession of his soul, until a storm of joy broke from him: "That is it!" he cried. "That is it! That is what I want! That is what I am

seeking, and what I want to do with all my heart!"<sup>42</sup> Francis was quite beside himself with enthusiasm for the task which had been set before the disciples of Jesus, and it flamed up within his spirit in its purest form. The Poverello had discovered once more, beneath a centuries-old layer of dust, the original precepts of Jesus. He had returned to the very words of Our Lord Himself, far above the heads of the Apostolic Communion. This was one of the greatest moments of Francis' life, and he was to become of the first importance to the whole of the Middle Ages as the revelation of the Gospel penetrated into his soul, and made him realise, with complete certainty, exactly what it was that he wanted. It is always a thrice blessed moment when a man, after much search and error, is at last accorded the happiness of discovery, and is able to sweep on towards his goal, with all the ardour of which his soul is capable. Francis considered this event as so remarkable an act of grace, that it caused him to write yet again in his *Testament*: "The Almighty Himself gave me to understand that I was to lead my life in accordance with the writings of the holy Gospels."<sup>43</sup> Because the undertaking of his life's task came through a revelation from God, Francis never questioned it, nor could it have been undermined by any doubts whatsoever.

The words of Jesus to the Apostles presented Francis with a clear understanding—for which he had sought so long—regarding the precise form of his Imitation, the pursuit of which, ever since his vision of Christ, he had considered as the primary duty of his life. According to the testimony of his followers, he wished to be "nothing more than the perfect Imitation of the Gospel."<sup>44</sup> For Francis, everything must be directed towards this end. Penance, the care of the lepers, the marriage with Poverty—all these things meant imitation, and nothing else. A faithful realisation of the Gospel life did not lie, for Francis, in the usual piety, beyond which he had already travelled very far. We get the impression that for the first time, a man had really understood, and put into practice, the oft-repeated call of Jesus: "Arise and follow me." The Imitation of Christ is the greatest thing a person can undertake for His sake; and everyone should seriously reflect on whether he has strength enough to "see it through." The development of Francis' later life only caused him to follow this call of Jesus in an ever-changing way. What the Imitation of Christ means is really only clear for the first time through Francis—and clear, in a hitherto completely unknown way. Francis' realisation of Jesus' command put into the shade everything which mankind had till then attempted in this connection. Other men's efforts appear ridiculously trivial in comparison with his. An irresistible power, which to us is incomprehensible, achieved the first successful imitation of Christ in the life of this new fool of God, who staked all on the game, and dared to live the Gospel free of compromise—a fact which in itself would still make a deep impression. Francis practised his imitation with such unsurpassed fanaticism that he became in fact a contemporary of Christ, having thrust aside, with a wave of the hand, the lapse of twelve hundred years between them; and he began again from the beginning, as though there had never

been the burden of ecclesiastical history. The state of synchronism, of which Kierkegaard wrote so profoundly, was achieved by Francis. And thanks to it he became the great Awakener of the Middle Ages. With his new imitation of Christ's words to the Apostles, he had shaken the mediaeval soul to its very depths, and given to it a movement, the dynamic force of which no modern man can ever understand.<sup>45</sup>

Francis tried, then, to solve the problem of the Brothers, which was becoming urgent, in the light of his Imitation. As he was being encouraged by the bishop to decide upon adopting the life of a monk or a hermit, "Francis refused the proposal humbly, but with the greatest possible resolution."<sup>46</sup> Francis had no desire to join any existing religious Order. He declared quite positively: "I will not conform to any Order at all, whether it be of St. Benedict, of St. Augustine, of St. Bernard, or of any other kind or form, excepting that which the Lord, in His compassion, has shown and granted me."<sup>47</sup> He envisaged a completely new community, such as had never before existed in Christianity. The Christians had, in their first community at Jerusalem, tried an experiment, in the hope of finding a solution; but since the experiment had not survived the first blow of the axe, they immediately renounced the form that suited them, and modelled themselves on heathen organisations, creating within the Church a specific Christian community life, but in a very much weakened form. Francis, on the contrary, felt himself compelled most urgently to the task of "gathering together a new and small community of people, who should be quite different from their forerunners."<sup>48</sup> This statement, from the old records, gives us a particular insight into Francis' heart. It allows us to see clearly that there was nothing conservative about the Poverello. He desired, consciously, something new—something which, as yet, had never existed. Just as the New Testament had once done, so did he now look upon his Brothers as a new people—a truth which had not been realised in Christianity for a long time past. Furthermore, he tried to form a new community for this new people. The fact that he wished to resolve the problem of the Brothers in a totally new way is a great enough ambition, irrespective of its accomplishment. He created for them a rule of conduct which issued, presumably, from the words of Jesus, and which had been lost. For it was on nothing less than the Sermon on the Mount, which a degenerate Christianity had made impracticable as an evangelical code, that Francis tried to order the problem of the Christian brotherhood anew. When he came to the injunction to be humble, he declared: "I wish this Order of Brotherhood to be known as the Little Brothers."<sup>49</sup> He himself did not invent this title of Minorites, or Lesser Friars: it had been whispered to him from the Gospel, where it is written, "the least of these my brethren."

In accordance with the name of this new community, the Minorites were to bear themselves with the utmost humility. The most puzzling thing of all is how Francis could, through the influence of his magic personality, have transformed something which had been known for so long, into the most unusual event in the world. For humility, under his

tireless leadership, assumed such proportions that its dimensions became such as men had never before conceived. Time after time, in the life of the Poverello, do we come up against this unusual love for self-humiliation, which Jesus Himself practised in the washing of the feet, according to the Gospel of St. John. In the image of his Lord, Francis, too, strove to descend into the abyss of humility, and, as a penitent, to sink deeper into it than anyone had ever done before him. The man of Assisi was the embodiment of subjection to such a degree that everything pales before it. He made it appear as one of the most profound secrets of the Gospel. Not only at the beginning of his penance, by kissing the leper, did he perfect that astonishing gesture of self-abasement: he was determined to serve abjectly at all times, and to feel himself as the least of men. If we meditate long enough over this humble descent of Francis, we will quite suddenly lay bare the Franciscan soul. Humility, for the Poverello, was not merely a virtue, like modesty. It represented for his new community that Christian behaviour to which the whole of their being was ordained, and which they looked upon as the greatest grace which a man could receive from God. Francis' conscious renunciation of eminence in no way implied a fawning disposition. It was the very purest form of mercy. In his boundless humility, Francis differs completely from all other Christians, for in him we meet a figure such as is hardly to be found in the whole history of the Church: a man whose religion was completely devoid of any desire for power. Schiller's reproof of Bernard of Clairvaux, which insisted that Bernard "represented a system which, from above, looked like a cross, but which opened out below to disclose a sword," could never be applied to Francis. For him, the problem of "religion and might," which has, time and again, brought all Christian institutions to disaster, simply did not exist. He recognised ambitious power as a poison fatal to all piety. The lordly power of command always contains a grave danger to the soul, and there is hardly a single man who is free from it. Francis, therefore, stayed not only beside his associates, but beneath them. This is why he would not hear of a monastery: he feared the abbot who would be obliged to rule. It was his intention to keep this evil away from his community. The eternally humble man is the seldom understood Franciscan mystery, which can obviously never be clearly sung, hymnologically, lest, by exaggeration, fear should bring about its antithesis.

Another characteristic of the Minorites was their lack of possessions. Francis wished to exclude all the collective wealth which, during the Middle Ages, often raised a monastery to being one of the greatest capitalist powers of its time. The Saint of Assisi went even further than the religious communism of the monastic Orders by means of this total lack of possessions; and in this he was far more radical than the great monastic fathers. Holy poverty was to be strictly observed by all his new followers. The Brothers were to possess nothing, absolutely nothing. Not a cell or house. Everything must come from strangers, and from pilgrimage. When the Bishop of Assisi suggested that this was an onerous way of life, the Poverello replied, "My lord, were we to possess property, then we should

have need of arms for our protection. From property would grow litigation and strife, and then the love of God and of one's neighbour would suffer untold damage. Therefore we will have no ephemeral possessions whatsoever."<sup>50</sup> In this simple speech Francis revealed the destiny of man with a crystal clarity to be found nowhere else in the history of the Christian Church. The madman had seen, only too clearly, that all warlike conflicts are inextricably bound up with property, and that the one engenders the other. This is the circular course of the development of life, which continually leads man, again and again, into unhappiness, and whose unhappy spell Francis wished to break. In the laying bare of the relationship of property to war lies one of the greatest of Francis' achievements, for he laid his axe at the very root of it. With a single grasp of the hand he tore down the illusory veil which held all men in thrall; and he gave them a clear insight into the foundations of the world. His discourses on property must not be regarded as pleonastic, but as an essential and necessary result of his relationship to Christ. Consequently, the renunciation of all property drove the Poverello into a struggle against money, the glittering embodiment of all power. In unequivocal language he impressed on his Brothers that they were to "accept no money."<sup>51</sup> On this point Francis allowed not the slightest jesting even. He punished a Brother who had disobeyed him in this with such terrible harshness, that the Brother was appalled at the ruthlessness of which Francis had shown himself capable. For Francis considered money as the incarnation of evil, and counselled his followers: "Look upon money and dung as having the same value."<sup>52</sup> The Poverello had clearly realised the murderous effect of Mammon upon the soul of man. Nobody could accuse him of being a capitalist on the reverse side of the medal, as it were, for he had seen right through the Satanic magic of money as no other Saint in Christianity had done before him. The inexorable bluntness with which he spurned the slightest touch of money shows, better than anything else, how inaccurate is the aesthetic representation of Francis, whose spirit was filled with an almost revolutionary will-power. It is here that we find the true countenance of Francis, which must not be painted over, but restored to light. Abhorrence of money brings out clearly the remoteness of the Poverello from everything which the normal man covets; but at the same time it shows, too, his unique nearness to Jesus, from Whose mouth, also, there had issued sharp words directed against Mammon. The indescribable divine joy which dwelt in Francis can only be achieved if one has nothing in common with the sinful world of money—even in its most refined form.

So that the Brothers could live, however, Francis ordered them to work and beg. Originally, work was the order, and the begging was incidental. The sequence of this gradually changed. The positive joy which filled the beggar in the Poverello is yet another gate through which the traveller must pass to a proper understanding of Francis. Francis was totally devoid of any aristocratic instincts, which might bid him turn aside from the ragged figure of a mendicant. He saw nothing despicable in asking for a gift. "The asking of alms is a heritage: it is the right of the poor man, which Our

Lord Jesus Christ has procured for us.”<sup>53</sup> And ever since the break with his family, Francis himself had had to resort to this. Celano tells how the Saint, “as he looked for the first time at his bowl, filled with all manner and description of victuals, shuddered with horror; but he thought of Our Lord, controlled himself, and ate with the pleasure of self-conquest.”<sup>54</sup> The misunderstood figure of the beggar in the history of Christianity wears a new garb in the case of Francis. Not every century showed the lack of understanding for the beggar which is so typical of the present age, with its soulless institutions for the poor, and the notices which adorn the doors of the houses: *No Beggars. No Hawkers*. Francis did not regard the beggar as a work-shy vagrant, to be considered as a disagreeable pest throughout the countryside. Rather did the beggar seem to him to have issued from a mysterious background. He was the poor man, who debased himself, and in whom, as in the lepers, Christ could be concealed. To the mediaeval mind the beggar was a religious phenomenon, just as he was in old Russia, where Gogol could still say, “The attitude of the beggar is a state of bliss which the world has so far failed to understand.”<sup>55</sup> So Francis imposed this condition on his new followers, and was thereby the true creator of the begging Orders, a movement without which the second half of the Middle Ages, as regards ecclesiastical history, cannot be understood. The movement of the begging Orders was basically far more radical than the heretical movement of the same period. The criticism of the latter was directed entirely against the Church, which had become wealthy, whereas the begging Orders struggled solely against the new economics of money, and were an “attempt to eliminate social distress through the services of a wide programme, in which the whole of mankind was to be helped.”<sup>56</sup>

To accomplish his task, Francis absolved the Brothers from their preaching duties, imitating yet again the essential meaning of the words of Jesus to the Apostles. It is impossible to present the Franciscan way of preaching in terms simple enough. There were no studied sermons; and all forms of rhetoric and recondite meanings were dispensed with. They were much more in the nature of homely addresses, which very often repeated the same thought; but there was about them something original, which all the learned sermons lacked—an inner fire which kindled a flame, tormenting men’s hearts, so that they became forgetful of time and place. There was something in the messages of Francis which cannot be recaptured in words. An eye-witness asserted that whenever he tried to recall a phrase of Francis’ it always seemed as though it consisted of words quite different from those which he had heard from the lips of the preacher. Francis’ sermons usually dealt with three themes, and to these he always returned. Firstly, exhortations to penitence—this warning permeated all his utterances. Francis himself had begun with penitence, and from this radical change of thought the great Awakener had received his original Christian message. The second theme concerned peace. God had “revealed to him that we should utter as our greeting: The Lord give thee peace.”<sup>57</sup> Francis was one of the few men who took Christian pacifism really seriously. Nothing was more necessary in the Italy of the thirteenth

century, torn to pieces by continual wars, than the reminder that the duty of Christians lay in peace. At Francis' instigation "eternal peace between rich and poor" was complete in Assisi. And the words have a pregnant mission to fulfil to-day.

*Praised be my Lord, through those who forgive from love of Thee,  
And who suffer misery and hardship;  
Happy are those who are patient in peace,  
For they have received their crown from Thee, O Highest !*

According to Chesterton's biography, the Saint "walked the world like the Pardon of God," exhorting all men to reconciliation.<sup>58</sup> His third theme, as distinct from his inflammatory exhortations to penance and to peace, was the coming of the Kingdom of God. Francis believed himself to be living through the last hours of the world, and that then the "eternal Kingdom" would dawn. He conceived this in a purely eschatological sense as an impending event of great magnitude.<sup>59</sup> To the execution of this message "in these last hours, the Minorites of the world were lent."<sup>60</sup> Only by taking this into account can the renunciation by Francis—and by Jesus—of culture be fully understood.

The early years of the Minorites were years of unparalleled enthusiasm, which swept through Italy like a Pentecostal storm. A magnetic exhilaration and a pureness of purpose, such as are only to be found in the beginnings of a movement, were peculiar to this epoch. One cannot exaggerate its importance and its magic. A splendour all its own casts a halo over this formative period. The straw fire of the ordinary revivalist movements has no similarity with the Franciscan movement, which rushed down like a mountain torrent. Francis' first companions cannot be described as ordinary men. Theirs were unusual natures—a religious élite, resolute to the last stake. From them issues the impetus of this movement, and the intensity and rapid expansion which it showed at the beginning. It was not yet circumscribed within hard and fast forms; everything was still in a molten state of being. The great youthfulness of the first Minorites has been decried by various chroniclers. This view, from which much may be deduced, implied that it was eternal youth which inspired the new community with the Word; and this has happened very rarely in the history of a religion as vital as Christianity. But we must be careful not to paint this springtime in too rosy hues. It was, first and foremost, a hard and difficult time. The Brothers had to endure much mockery and persecution: "Many men threw rubbish at them, others laid clods in their hands, and asked them if they would not play. Sometimes they would be seized from behind by the cowl, and made to fall on their backs. This and much else was done to them: for they were considered so insignificant, that men used them shamefully, at their pleasure."<sup>61</sup> Although they had to bear much suffering, were often in sore distress, and found no lodging anywhere, the high-rising tide of their enthusiasm prevented any breakdown. Quite the reverse: for the opposition of the ignorant masses merely served to increase their heroism. The first Franciscans were filled with a seraphic fire which no

amount of water could extinguish. Ignoring all their privations, the Brothers, at first, led a "noble, angelic life"; a "mighty happiness and a unique joy ruled in the circle of St. Francis and his companions."<sup>62</sup> The words at our disposal are inadequate, and can only give a pale description of the overflowing happiness and the Pentecostal spirituality, which characterise the earliest Minorites. "They served each other with the deepest love, and cared for one another as a mother cares for her only beloved son."<sup>63</sup> This first community life was animated by a maternal warmth, and Francis likened the position of the Brothers to that of a "mother."<sup>64</sup> This small point proves that at its inception the Franciscan movement was a much milder, more indulgent, and, we might almost say, more feminine interpretation of the heart. This is an attitude which has always knocked on the door at different periods in the history of the Church; but previous to this, it had always been prevented from entering by brutal, despotic natures.

At the outset, Francis' new people had nothing monkish about them, and, "furthermore, his happy community was not called an Order."<sup>65</sup> The "penitent men of Assisi" considered themselves, above all, as a brotherhood.<sup>66</sup> At the beginning they were more alive, and more uncompromising than an Order, with all its rules, could have been. Francis would not allow the new spirit to be petrified into organised channels. The Brothers must not be kept isolated from the activities of the world as they were in the Benedictine monasteries, where this was done to enable them to practise contemplation. The Poverello shattered all the sanctified, monkish Orders. As we have seen already, he scattered all that the worthy Benedict of Nursia had assembled together so painstakingly. Francis did not call his "men of the forest"<sup>67</sup> monks, nor did he wish to keep them from contact with ordinary men. Catholics, moreover, have found it necessary to explain that "originally he did not want an Order in the sense that a Benedict or a Bernard wanted one. What he intended was a living condition of Christianity. . . . The ideas of the first, second and third Orders were auxiliary representations, with which something quite new was intended."<sup>68</sup> In so far as one may wish to describe this as monasticism, it was a completely new type of it, and one which was absolutely alien to the monkish tradition. Internally released from the worldly spirit, the Brothers were to bring their influence to bear on the world, and to penetrate it with their religious virtue. Francis probably had in mind something similar to what Dostoevsky sought to express in the figure of Alyosha: something which, at best, we may still describe as world monasticism. This was Francis' most powerful idea, which, thanks to its audacious novelty, was not in the least understood by contemporary Christianity. In the Tertiary Order, Francis managed to rescue only a pitiful remnant of this deep Christian striving, which we must needs regard as a substitute for his original intention. The new monasticism no longer consisted of retirement, but of an onslaught on the world; for this reason it was something fundamentally different from what had been previously attempted by the anchorites and cenobites. Although so much has been written about

Francis, this creative achievement of his has hardly been appreciated to the full; and yet it entails something to which one cannot give too much thought. Francis' new saintliness, which had lost all fear of mundane activities, followed an unknown path, for which his age was not yet ready, and which to-day has an even greater future than it had then.

## V

"Go, my brother, and seek out the swine: for you do seem to have more in common with them than with men. Roll with them in the dirt, give them your rules, and practise your preaching upon them." These are the words which Innocent III is reported to have used to Francis when he sought the papal consent for his new community, which had meanwhile increased to about a dozen Brothers. Francis bowed and went away, rolled with the swine in their dirt, and returned, covered with filth, to the Pope. "Holy Father," he said, "I have done what you have bidden me. Now do you grant my petition."<sup>69</sup> The great Pope, disarmed by this humble submission, acceded to his wishes. According to another version of the story, Innocent III, on seeing Francis for the first time, and noting his ill-kempt hair and repulsive mien, dismissed him curtly; and only after a dream in which he saw an unknown monk supporting the crumbling Lateran, did he grant Francis' request. Historically, it is impossible to establish anything definite about what actually transpired at the first meeting of Francis and Innocent III. Unquestionably it was one of the most momentous occasions in mediaeval Church history, when these two men were confronted with each other. It can only be compared with that scene in the Gospel according to St. John, when Jesus stood before the Roman governor, Pilate. *And Pilate saith unto Him, What is truth?* It is impossible for Francis and Innocent III to have stood for a long time in silence and mutual understanding, as the poetical version of the encounter would have it. Innocent III was a Pope of the first order. He had brought to fruition the proud plans of Gregory VII for world domination; and because of this, he could not possibly have understood the new soul that had arisen in Francis. Between the two men, Catholicism and Catholicism stood apart in sharp contrast. Two completely different worlds were represented in the titanic ambassador of Church imperialism, and in the Poverello, with his total renunciation and unceasing humility: between them stood a gulf as deep as an abyss, which could be bridged outwardly, but never inwardly. We must leave the tragedy of this first encounter, and avoid weakening it by attempting to gloss it over with a false harmony. The unbridgeable difference is evident in the scarcity of the records. The imposing Pope, wise through his unpleasant experiences with the rejected Waldensians, did not immediately dismiss Francis, nor did he give him the requested permission. He simply consoled him with all manner of excuses and postponements, and granted him only verbal permission to preach—a permission which, for this legally-minded Pope, was in no way binding. Francis, however, in his boundless humility was content with the least

thing, and he quickly abandoned the Eternal City, whose ostentatious luxury did not accord with his love of poverty.

During the following years Francis' new community underwent an unexpected phase of development. The first change was brought about by Clare's turning to Francis: she had fled from her parents' house, and the Poverello entrusted her, temporarily, to the care of the Benedictine nuns, until he could find some suitable outlet for her activities. He could not very well permit female followers to adopt the role of itinerant preachers, and he was therefore obliged to return to the earlier monastic usages. This gave rise to his first compromise. Even more difficult was it to form a permanent organisation, which was now an unavoidable necessity, owing to the rapid increase in the number of the brethren. Organisation was not a strong point with Francis, but in this case the Saint had no choice. The expansion of his community forced him automatically along the path. The work grew far beyond his own person, and he was no longer able to keep the movement fully under control. The new community underwent a radical change, which made of it, too, an Order with its own hard and fast rules. In principle there was no longer any difference between it and the Dominican Order with which, originally, Francis had refused to throw in his lot. The movement now numbered some thousand members, and its consequent unwieldiness brought about a visible undermining of its original enthusiastic impetus. There were soon many heads among this swiftly increasing number of followers, and they were no longer all filled with the same will. Even if each newcomer had experienced a genuine moving of the spirit, it was often only a momentary zeal, which did not respond and ripen to all the demands made on it. Not all the Brothers were filled with the same readiness to submit to the unconditional. Francis watched this growth with ever-increasing anxiety, and uttered a pregnant wish that the world might but seldom see the Minorites, and be amazed at the smallness of their number. He never strove to augment his following, for then the Brothers could no longer be the salt of the earth. And just as disturbing was the entrance of learned men into the Order. Francis had a reverence for knowledge as a gift from God, as we may see in his pronouncement: "Where I find pages with God's Holy Name and Words in an unseasonable place, I will gather them up; and I beg others to do the same, and to lay them in the place to be preferred."<sup>70</sup> Nor did he exclude pagan writings from this respectful custom, thus affording a splendid instance of his far-reaching enlightenment. But he had no wish to have learning in his community. "Those who have no knowledge of learning should not insist on pursuing it; their whole endeavour should be to possess the Spirit of the Lord."<sup>71</sup> His rejection of culture could not possibly take any other course. His knowledge did not spring from learned endeavour, and he feared learning's puffed up pride. So Francis said that a man should possess "but few books"; and he was even capable of disposing of the first New Testament which the Brotherhood possessed, out of love of his neighbour.<sup>72</sup> Of a scholar who desired to enter his community, he required that he should renounce his learning. But in this expectation Francis was

bitterly disappointed. Scholarly interest, born of a world different from that of Francis, penetrated ruthlessly into his Brotherhood, and changed it even more than the community's rapid growth had done. With their fundamentally different mode of thinking, the scholars led the new community more and more in the direction of that spiritually fruitful Franciscan Order, which everywhere, throughout the course of history, has produced the most serviceable results; but which did not conform to the original will of its founder.<sup>73</sup>

The change in Francis' original creation obliged him to enter into new negotiations with the Curia. These negotiations were undertaken with Cardinal Ugolino, later Pope Gregory IX, and they can only be outlined in brief here. It is difficult to understand the true course of them, since objective problems become inextricably involved with psychological imponderables. It would be unfair to portray Ugolino simply as a wolf in sheep's clothing, to whom Francis fell victim. The Cardinal was affectionately disposed towards the Saint, and Francis, in turn, had great confidence in him.<sup>74</sup> Ugolino was a friend of music and loved to smooth out differences, while yet remaining as a powerful ruling prince of the Church, who could go, if necessary, against his own nature. The rise of the Franciscan movement was undeniably a source of embarrassment to the Curia. The shepherd of tradition could not possibly have welcomed the appearance of the new community. They held up to the Church a mirror, in which the Church was not best pleased to have to behold the great struggle which, at that time, was being enacted between Papacy and Empire. Furthermore, the Saint was a living reality, not a relic. And this, of course, was something fundamentally different. His efforts had the effect of a revolutionary hurricane, and involuntarily shook the Church to its very foundations—though in a different way from that in which it was later to be shaken at the time of the Reformation. Francis with his imitation of the New Testament, questioned many of the ecclesiastical assertions, and threatened, with his monasticism which brooked no possessions, to overthrow the entire fabric of the Church. Since he embodied a real, and not just a spiritual poverty, his very appearance acted as an unspoken reproach to the wealthy Church. The Vatican, with its shrewd sagacity for summing up a position, tried to trap Francis by subtle diplomacy. The Poverello's maximalism smacked of fanaticism to the well-balanced sensibility of the Curia; and the Curia accordingly tried gently to "improve matters." In any case the Lateran treated Francis with reserve. The inner contradiction which the worldly Curia must have felt towards the fool of God can readily be imagined. In these negotiations the princes of the Church were only acting according to their lights, and no reproach can be levelled against them.

Ugolino next pounced on a strong trend within the Order itself, a trend which, ever since 1217, had been crying out against the unconditional discarding of property and the abandonment of learning. This lead, which had been given by a well-educated Brother, Elias of Cortona, was wholeheartedly supported by the Curia. In Elias, a moderate member of the Order, Ugolino recognised a spirit after his own heart: in fact Elias' way of

thinking was so akin to his own, that the Cardinal sought to further his ideas by every means within his power. He looked favourably on all those trends within the Order which sought an assimilation to the world; for the Curia had no fundamental belief in the practicability of Francis' endeavours. With the realistic attitude characteristic of all political Popes, Ugolino was concerned with the attainment of the feasible only. This high prince of the Church did not impose on the Order, from without, a form acceptable only to himself: that is an unhistorical representation. He merely helped the moderate elements within the Order to victory, and by means of privileges, accorded them every conceivable assistance. To the Church, the Franciscan Order was much more important than Francis. The result of the papal influence was a visible distortion of Francis' endeavours; but it was not the only factor in the transformation. The inherent law of things had brought about a change for which neither Ugolino nor the papal blessing were responsible. Francis' creation had, through these negotiations with the Curia, undergone an all-round weakening. This is not a tendentious assertion (even though it might be exaggerated to suit the occasion), for it contains a germ of historical truth which cannot be seriously contested. Even Catholic accounts are unable to ignore the change entirely.<sup>75</sup> The true value of the preceding argument need not therefore appear to be purely negative. We may also say, with Henry Thode, that the Curia, by behaving in this way, saved Francis' work, and ensured its lasting existence. This attitude does not exclude the real truth; for the fact is that it cannot be denied that the followers of Francis, who did not share his spiritual greatness, were subject to laws quite distinct from those which he obeyed.

Francis' adjustment to this development was a question of the greatest importance, and is dealt with far too cursorily in the studies by Jørgensen and Cuthbert. The Saint was in the position where he was compelled to pour new wine into old skins. The difficulty lay not so much in the contradiction of having to found an Order when he was a man who was fundamentally opposed to Orders. His suffering was much more profound. It would be foolish to imagine that he himself did not realise these things, and did not experience the very greatest anxiety. The Poverello's inner conflict can be clearly distinguished, and we cannot overlook the dark shadows which clouded his life. The man of Assisi did not wander in the sunshine only. The soul of Francis cannot be fully understood if one does not discern the hidden tragedy, which was played out between himself and the Church.

Francis' Catholic conviction is, of course, beyond discussion. He gave many proofs of his attachment to the Church, which cannot possibly be set aside. Even in his *Testament*, he announced his unchanging loyalty: "The Lord gave me, and He still gives me, an unbounded confidence in the priests who, because of their consecration, live in accordance with the precepts of the Holy Church of Rome."<sup>76</sup> Francis possessed a positive relationship with regard to the Catholic faith, and in this respect he felt himself to be like his Lord: "I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil."

Wherever anti-ecclesiastical behaviour might have been attributed to him, he avoided it. In his dream of the hen that had so many chickens she "could not find room for them all under her wings"<sup>77</sup> he did not develop its obvious heretical sense. That his life might have ended at the stake if it had lasted longer is pure fancy, and has absolutely no foundation in the facts. His emphasis of Catholicism puts him against the Waldensians and Katharians, with whom he had no sympathy at all.

But despite his unruffled Catholicism, Francis was by no means blind towards the Church; and nothing could be more superficial than to speak of the Poverello as ingenuous. The Saint of Assisi was not an innocent child. He felt the fundamental difference between his own spirit and that of the Church, and, without desiring it, he found himself ranged against the Church. With his new monasticism in the world, he had soared far beyond the priestly horizon. It gave to Francis' religion something unclerical, however, because he was a pupil of God rather than a pupil of the Church. The most shining example of this was the far-reaching difference which arose between Francis and the empirical Church, in their diametrically opposed viewpoints about the Crusades. While the Church was sallying forth to conquer the Holy Land by violence, Francis was the only unarmed Crusader, who thought that the peaceful conversion of the Saracens to the Gospel would be the more seemly course of action. And in the hotly contested portiuncula indulgence he advocated an unbounded measure of forgiveness, to which the Church called a halt. Francis often came up against ecclesiastical law. He must obviously have seen the clergy's weaknesses, or he could never have said: "We have been sent to help the clergy to save their souls, inasmuch as we leap into the breach where they are found wanting."<sup>78</sup> He wished consciously "to turn a blind eye to their sins."<sup>79</sup> Francis knew of the clergy's insufficiency, but he took pains to achieve his object with them by peaceful means, and not in open conflict. It was his intention "to convert the princes of the Church, first and foremost by Sainly humility and respect."<sup>80</sup> At the same time he clearly gives us to understand that he considered their betterment necessary. Francis certainly saw the shortcomings of the Church and perhaps observed them even more sharply than he ever actually admitted; but he understood that nothing much is achieved by hostile criticism, since it is usually the result of moral indignation, and is in no way concerned with the evangelical sharing of sin.

With all his submission to the Church, however, Francis tried, at the same time, to resist the development of the Order as sponsored by the Curia. The old biographers were not unaware of this, and made cautious references to it. According to Celano, Francis announced in great excitement: "My son, I love the Brothers as much as I can; but if they would only follow in my footsteps, I would love them even more, and not find myself estranged from them: for there are some among the number of our superiors, who lead them into other paths."<sup>81</sup> Even more clearly does his complaint at the new direction the Order was taking ring out in the *Mirror of Perfection*: "Many Brothers, and above all the higher members

d teachers, advised in contradiction to himself," thereby causing the decay of the Order."<sup>82</sup> Francis has not merely spoken discontentedly out this matter. That would be much too weak a description of the actual state of affairs. In his despair the Saint often inveighed loudly against disloyalty and treachery: "Who are these who have torn my Order and that my Brothers from my grasp?"<sup>83</sup> Untold misery possessed his soul. We can hear the stifled groans and sobs which were wrung from the Poverello. The drama of Francis' soul, even more grievous than the parting from his mother, must not be glossed over with unctuous phrases. Even though no blood flowed, this silent tragedy is part of the picture of the unknown Francis. The portrayal of this tragic business is not a question of artistic interpretation. Even Father Lippert the Jesuit let slip the words: "Obviously here is the beginning of the tragedy of Francis; and here, too, begins his painful path of undreamed of bitterness. Far too little an effort has been made to penetrate into the spiritual suffering of this upright and pious man, during the last years of his life."<sup>84</sup> That the old sources, with the exception of the record of Brother Leo and his companions, hint only slightly at Francis' moving Passion, and do not openly portray it, is one of their greatest defects. There is not a shadow of doubt that his eyes were awakened from so much weeping over this sorrow. In the end Francis tired from the leadership of the Order. His *Testament* shows his last attempt to forge a weapon of defence against this fateful development. But the Church deprived it of its force after his death. In the statement of his wishes, in which he tried to unite his obedience to the Church and the affirmation of his own independence, Francis underlined once more the direct revelation from God, which had originally called his work into being. This fact alone should have prevented the Brothers from undertaking important changes in the Order. With many an adjuration, Francis forbade his followers to add anything to or take anything from his words. They could rather preserve his writing, and keep it by them with the Rules . . . I conjure all my Brothers, both ecclesiastical and laic, to strong obedience to the Rules, and to these words, which must be so understood. The Lord gave me the Rules, and these words, to be written down in concise and simple phrases: so concise and simple, indeed, that you shall keep them in memory until the end."<sup>85</sup> Francis in his indescribable suffering, even had recourse to a numb belief in the power of letters, in which he sought a remedy in "letters without meaning,"<sup>86</sup> whereby he forgot that the spirit kills, but the letter kills. In his sore agony at the new path which the Order was following, he eventually demanded that blind obedience which springs from the inner virtue of the Son of God, and which never had an effect whenever it was practised. The spiritual dismemberment which Francis suffered in this affair was so great that it threatened to destroy him; and it certainly left behind, on the man himself, those deplorable traces out of which, with all due respect to the Saint, one cannot remain silent. As this cruel sword was plunged into the soul of Francis, he suddenly made a quite unexpected change of course. He remained silent, and he protested no more against the irrevocable secularisation of the Order.

Francis bowed to the will of the Curia, which pushed him gently aside, and he made no gesture of rebellion. Francis realised the full meaning of submission for the first time, when he accepted this unpleasant fate as his latest tribulation, and put his capacity for renunciation to the proof yet again. Humility bade him bow to the incomprehensible, and bade him oppose the Evil One no longer, as Jesus had recommended in the difficult phrases of the Sermon on the Mount. Tolstoy was not the first to point out the unfathomable wisdom of the Sermon: Francis had already realised it. The humble one stood there, delivered over to all manner of coarse violence which would be powerless to harm him in any way which was not ordained by God. Francis, who never dreamed of self-assertion, is the greatest defenceless figure in the history of Christianity. But his renunciation of all weapons of defence is very far removed from weakness. Whether we consider his resignation as futile or not, it is the decisive factor in a true understanding of the Franciscan soul: for by his lowly submission to the unhappy development of the Order, Francis revealed his true Saintliness. Never was he more Saint-like than then. He considered what was happening to be wrong, but submitted himself to the decrees of the Church, even though he could not understand them. This self-imposed subjection to the papal dispositions is the true attitude of the holy man, and reaches down into fundamental depths. It required much more inner strength and courage than would have been needed for external rebellion. True religious greatness is synonymous with this submissive behaviour. And in this way Francis disarmed the fury of the Church, and comported himself in a more Christian manner than did his papal opponent. As a result, "this humble and selfless submission to an imperfect and sinful ecclesiastical authority gave to the 'poor man of Assisi' an authority in the Church of Rome far greater than that of the omnipotent Innocent III."<sup>87</sup>

## VI

After this painful experience Francis withdrew into himself completely. But he did not do so as a man embittered, with resentment in his heart. The Poverello was ignorant of any sadness in resignation, and he sought out solitude once more. Francis went forward more resolutely than ever along the path of the Saints, so that he could perfect, in his own person, the uncompromising Imitation which had been shown to be impossible of fulfilment by the Order as a whole. The Saint of Assisi achieved by himself alone a faultless accordance of theory and practice; and no flaw can be seen in the result. He never spoke of things which he had only known intellectually, and to which he was not actually suited. What his spirit considered to be good he put immediately into action, and this always, in the first place, by himself. He never ordered anything to be done, which he had not himself done previously. An all-powerful unity of thought and deed was peculiar to Francis. From this issued the irresistible might of example. The untrammelled congruence of theory and practice seems to be trifling, perhaps,

but it is in fact the rarest thing in the whole range of religion. To how few Christians has it been granted to embody in their conduct everything which urges them in their souls towards the light! Francis had been granted this wondrous grace. He could do what he wished. There has never been a divergence of opinion in this respect. One can hardly say anything greater of a man than this.

The more the Order decayed, the more ruthlessly did Francis add to his own renunciation. To every negligence within the Order he replied with a redoubled demand upon himself. It is in this way that his increasing asceticism is to be understood. He had paid homage to it since the beginning of his life of penance, and he practised a dark asceticism, the sanguinary earnestness of which makes one shudder. He suppressed not only sin but also the external senses, since through them death enters the soul. "He rarely allowed himself the pleasure of cooked food; and when he did so, he spoiled it with ashes, or took away the good spiced taste with cold water."<sup>88</sup> Francis was an enemy to all the comforts of life. He directed his ascetic struggle most sharply of all against his body—against "Brother Ass," as he called it mockingly. "The zealous warrior of Christ never spared his body, but regarded it as something alien and outside himself, subjecting it to the worst possible chastisements of word and deed."<sup>89</sup> Francis ill-treated his own body so ruthlessly that at a later date the doctors were horrified when they saw his wasted form. His leaning towards asceticism also took expression as a curt renunciation of the opposite sex: "Woman was so repulsive to him, that one could almost think that he avoided her, not as a warning and an example, but from horror and revulsion."<sup>90</sup> It is possible that Celano, in this phrase, is referring too frankly to his own personal monastic tastes. In any case, Jesus had not adopted such an attitude; and Francis would not therefore have been in harmony with Him, if it were true that he did not look at women at all. Did the Poverello, whose relationship to Sister Clare was shrouded in the most sensitive love, really behave in this manner? Whatever the truth, Francis certainly practised denial. The passionate asceticism of the Saint of Assisi should not be regarded as mediaeval constraint, and separated from him as such. Rather is it an essential part of the complete portrait of him. A Francis without asceticism would not be Francis. All the descriptions which omit this side of his character are a falsification of him. His ascetic competence cannot be stressed strongly enough, because it was important to him. It protects his figure from aesthetic misuse. Rigorous asceticism serves as a barrier to all those without a genuine call, who would like to approach Francis and play a non-compulsory game with him. Whoever wishes to arrive at the real Francis must pass through the narrow gateway of asceticism, the value of which modern man is always inclined to underestimate.

The most astonishing thing in Francis' ascetic life is his freedom from all moroseness. In view of Jesus' injunction that in fasting men should not appear sad, Francis was actually filled with a sunny serenity in the midst of his dark self-mortifications. This is one of the greatest surprises in his life, and in this inexhaustible joy lies one of his greatest secrets, which we can

only approach with the utmost reserve. Nothing, however, was so construed in his destiny as this extraordinary gaiety: for he has been regarded as Brother Lightfoot, who, with seeming joviality, was always ready with a smiling jest. His inimitable heavenly humour has naturally nothing in common with superficial optimism, and we shall do well to speak cautiously about Francis' smile. It cannot be explained from his natural aptitude, but is embedded deeply in his asceticism. Francis' joy was born of a religious source, the origin of which must be sought in his close unity with Christ. When he fled into a dark crypt from before his father, "an untold, and until then unknown, joy flowed over him."<sup>91</sup> This joy pursued him through the whole of the rest of his life. "From now onwards, he was filled with so great a joy that he could not restrain his exultation, and involuntarily divulged something of his secret to the ears of men."<sup>92</sup> This exuberant joy must not be regarded as a contradiction of Francis' penitence. For him penitence was the beginning of a new life, and not a thing to make him hang his head. His unspeakable gaiety flowed from the certainty of his redemption, and he considered it, with genial insight, as one of his best weapons against the wiles of the Devil. He commanded the Brothers emphatically in his "Rules": "Ye shall take care that ye do not behave outwardly like melancholy hypocrites. But ye shall behave in the Lord, fresh and gay and accordingly agreeable."<sup>93</sup> The early commentators underline this "ineffable and immeasurable joy" of Francis very strongly.<sup>94</sup> It was a joy which often caused him to "pour out the sweet melody of his spirit" in a French song. "It was always the highest and first care of the happy Francis to be filled unceasingly with inner and outward spiritual serenity, even when not at prayers or at Holy Mass."<sup>95</sup> He even blamed the Brothers who could not master their melancholy moods, and, for himself, admitted, "Whenever the temptation of melancholy comes over me, I watch the serenity of my Companion and His serenity frees me immediately from the temptation of melancholy; and I become joyful, both within and without."<sup>96</sup> This shining joy of Francis' is an incontrovertible testimony to the fact that he had understood the Gospel in its deepest sense, as joy at the coming of the Kingdom—something which had been forgotten very early in the history of Christianity. Very few writings of the Fathers of the Church allow any trace of this "great joy" to be felt; yet Christians are exhorted to joy, and it was "brought to all men" by the Angels on Christmas Eve. We may read at length in theological books before encountering the faintest glimmer of this religious joy: yet it is the very heartbeat of the Gospel. In the case of Francis, the joy of God erupted like a volcano, so that we stand spellbound before the spectacle. Sabatier remarks that the word "joy" is the one most frequently used in Francis' writings, and, in consequence, his Christianity has that beneficent sunniness to which we might apply the words of St. Peter: "It is good for us to be here. If thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles . . ." In Francis the perfect joy, to which the Gospel of St. John insists that we should listen, had once again come to life. This heavenly happiness of the *Little Flowers* can only be compared with the eternal beauty which has come down to us

in the Gospel; admittedly this is in poetic form, but it still has the true Franciscan spirit.<sup>97</sup> His ecstatic intoxication represents the personal substance of the Poverello, which even to-day eludes those who hold to Francis' mystical dialogue. Ecstatic joy is the nucleus of the Franciscan feeling for life; and it bore the promise of a new era of joy upon the face of the earth.

His enthusiastic joy exerted an influence on Francis' relationship to nature, which has, admittedly, often been misunderstood. It was quite free from any form of sentimentality, as is shown by Francis' terrifying cursing of the swine which fell upon the lamb. The Poverello, with unparalleled impartiality, embraced the entire Creation of God, making no difference between organic and inorganic nature; and his sense of the sacredness of all things sprang from his religiousness.

As the personification of Christ in the Middle Ages, Francis considered nature as an image of God. He loved the beasts and the plants, because they were creations of His Heavenly Father, and because they aroused religious associations in him. The Poverello found joy in the flowers because they reminded him of the flower of the seed of Jesse, whose fragrance had awakened thousands from death. He carried the little worm to the roadside, because he thought of the words of the Psalm: "I am a worm, and no man." He loved the lamb, since Christ, too, is the Lamb of God, Who bore the sins of the world, and allowed Himself to be led like a lamb to the slaughter. This is explicit when he looked at a dead lamb, "and he thought of another Lamb, who had also been killed."<sup>98</sup> The Saint followed everywhere "in the tracks of the Beloved Lord, which are imprinted in nature; out of everything he prepared himself a stairway which led up to the throne of God. He embraced all creatures in an unheard of, pious love; he spoke to them of the Lord, and exhorted them to His praise. He did not extinguish any light, lamp, or candle: for his hand was unwilling to disturb the glimmering which gave a promise of eternal life."<sup>99</sup> As opposed to the modern view, in which nature is the goal and not the path, Francis saw, like Jesus in the Gospels, an image of God in all living creatures. In this manner, the whole of nature was a ladder for this great symbolist: and he climbed up the rungs of nature to the Creator.

Francis' relationship to nature did not, however, exhaust itself in his symbolical conception of it. With his brotherly attitude, he far surpassed the usual mediaeval attitude to this subject. Once more it is Celano, of all his biographers, who throws the most light on this new type of seeing and feeling nature. "Wherever he found a flowering meadow, there he preached; and he called upon it to praise the Lord, even as if it had been a rational being. In the same manner did he treat the sown fields and the vineyards, the stones and the forests, all the fair meads, the running streams, the green gardens, the earth, the fire, the air, and the wind. And he counselled them all with upright purity of heart to love God; and in a strangely hidden way he penetrated into the heart of each creature with his sharp-sightedness: as though he were penetrating into the glorious freedom of the Son of God."<sup>100</sup> The dumb world of plants, and the inarticulate animals,

everything that crawled and flew, Francis embraced with this divinatory love, thus making the entire sensible and insensible creation a definite part of his religious experience. As with his heart he divined the secrets of every creature, so did his religious attitude lead him to preach to the birds. Francis addressed the beasts, the wind, and the stars by name, as brothers and sisters, thus affirming his tenderly caressing relationship to them in so inward a manner that they might have been beings of the same species as himself. Francis' grandiose kinship with the natural world finds no analogy in the history of Christianity. Not even Christ Himself had done this. With incomparable audacity, he crossed the dividing barrier, which a haughty lack of understanding had erected between man and beast.

In his famous *Hymn to the Sun*, Francis has given the most enduring expression to this relationship to nature which exists; and it has scarcely ever been correctly estimated. It must be appraised as an example of universal sanctification; and the centuries cannot depreciate the value of his golden words, for they shine with the radiance of God:

*Highest, Almighty, Good, Lord!*

*Thine are the praises, the glory and the honour, and every benediction.*

*To Thee alone, O Highest, are they due,*

*And no man is worthy to name Thee!*

*Praised be Thou, my Lord, with all Thy creatures,*

*Especially our noble brother sun,*

*Who makes the day, and through him Thou dost light us.*

*And it is fair and radiant with mighty splendour;*

*Of Thee, O Highest, a living image!*

*Praised be Thou, my Lord, through our sisters, moon and stars!*

*In Heaven Thou hast formed them, so clear, and rich, and fair!*

*Praised be Thou, my Lord, through our brother wind,*

*Through air and cloud and fair or evil weather,*

*For all Thy creatures sustenance Thou givest!*

*Praised be Thou, my Lord, through our sister water,*

*Who is most useful, humble, rich and chaste!*

*Praised be Thou, my Lord, through our brother fire,*

*Through which Thou dost illuminate the night,*

*And it is fair and merry, sturdy, strong!*

*Praised be Thou, my Lord, through our sister, mother earth,*

*Who us sustains and governs,*

*And beareth diverse fruits, with coloured flowers and grasses . . .*

An interpretation of Francis' attitude towards nature, which is at its clearest in the *Hymn to the Sun*, must not be considered primarily, as Joseph Görres has done, from its poetic structure.<sup>101</sup> Francis was a

troubadour of God, who loved to "sing hymns of praise to God in the French tongue,"<sup>102</sup> which he spoke very imperfectly. His religious singing is a phenomenon parallel to the troubadour movement of the outer world. He described himself and his Brothers as the "minstrels of God," whose task was "to touch the hearts of men, and to fill them with serenity of the spirit."<sup>103</sup> There is something of the artist in Francis' personality. This "*jongleur de Dieu*" composed true Christian poems, similar to the intoxicating sweetness of the lauds of the Franciscan Jacopone da Todi. A delight in nature lies in Francis' poetry, but this is not all: it contains a grandiose transfiguration of the world, far removed from an ordinary pantheistic feeling for life, and which is only paralleled by Russian Christianity, with which Francis has many points in common.<sup>104</sup> This feeling for creatures was apotheosised for the first time by a Christian in the hymnological psalm to the sun, and carried out to its logical conclusion.

If we would really understand the innermost core of Francis' attitude towards nature, we must not confuse it with the mediaeval feeling for nature, to which Francis was certainly not victim, although this has been suggested in modern times.<sup>105</sup> Francis had overcome the timid shyness with which the Middle Ages stood in regard to all the manifestations of nature. He knew a God-filled creation, and through him every creature exulted. Nor must Francis' relationship to nature, irrespective of the many signs to be found in him, be regarded as an anticipation of the spirit of the Renaissance, for the latter developed along quite different lines.<sup>106</sup> The great art of Giotto has more of the external than the soul of Francis understood; and Dante's *Divine Comedy* is inspired by the Thomist, and not by the Franciscan spirit. Francis' relationship to nature is rather a behaviour *sui generis*. Its roots, about which, curiously enough, no question has been raised, lie in the humility which forbade him to set himself above any creatures. The new joy of nature which Francis felt for creation as a whole arose from his specific religiousness. It enabled him to understand, not in principle, but little by little, the difference between man and beast. Admittedly, by doing so, he has touched on a complex question entailing problems in itself which are almost insoluble.<sup>107</sup> And yet his attitude is opposed to the reproach which Gandhi levelled against Christianity. In Francis' relationship to nature, which was filled with charitable love, the false barrier line was corrected, and even surpassed, a thing which Christianity had abandoned for hundreds of years. And in the case of Francis, it was not only surpassed, but at the same time somewhat altered, inasmuch as with him the relation to animals illuminated the Messianic Kingdom. That bestial violence of nature with which man, seduced by the words "subdue them, and have dominion over them" has so heavily infringed had become softened, in the man of Assisi, into a boundless surrender, which made him feel a loving responsibility for all creatures. His speech to all beings, calling them brothers, portrays a quite unknown contact with animals which, attracted by his Divine virtue, themselves replied with a hitherto unknown trust. Even to-day this universal brotherhood is somewhat inconceivable, and makes Francis' peace with the

animals infinitely pleasing. One feels that in this connection, a covering has been removed from the Saint, and that a completely new view of him has been granted to us. The sanctification of all creatures was perfected, and the way shown for the great return of the whole of Creation to God. And since Francis had "returned to a state of original innocence"<sup>108</sup> no less a task lay before him than the restoration of the relationship to wild creatures which had once existed in the Garden of Eden. This miracle had as its result a changing of the whole of nature. As long as Francis lived, "all the fields were full of fruitfulness," and no sooner had he died than "the whole position changed, and the terror of famine spread wide throughout the land."<sup>109</sup> No figure can be looked upon more mythically than was Francis in these words of Celano's. His relationship to nature which, from the instinctive ethical standpoint to the solid companionship in suffering, surpassed all things, contained the new religious world-feeling to which this seraphic man had given utterance for the first time.<sup>110</sup> It is irrelevant to despise this normal compassion, which has nothing to do with an emotional relationship to nature, as a heresy of the heart. Rather must we regard it as the Saint's attempt to understand the Heavenly creativeness of nature from within. This act represents one of the most admirable of the new messages which Francis had to give to Christianity. Francis' incredible closeness to nature cannot be described as modern—it is much more: it is a sign-post for the future. Even if the Church could not accept this loving sense of unity with nature in its entirety, it has never been completely lost since then. At certain times it has always reappeared in the later history of Christianity. From time to time individuals of grace have arisen and achieved a similar mystic sense of unity with all wild creatures. The far too little known mystic, Rosa of Lima (1586—1617), who sang duets with the mosquitoes in the most melancholy strains, and with incomprehensible serenity,<sup>111</sup> shows that Francis' new message did not fall quite unheeded to the ground. This precursory message of a new world of sentiment is the greatest hope of mankind.

Francis' new relationship to nature loses itself in the depths of mysticism. His relationship to Jesus was already qualified as Christ-mysticism, and his marriage, too, with Lady Poverty was a mystical union. Everything in Francis has grown out of his specific Christian mysticism, a fact which up to the present has been far too little noted. Admittedly he taught no mysticism, and we will find in him no learned distinctions of purification, enlightenment and perfection; nor did he know anything of the differentiation within contemplation. As a self-declared enemy of scholasticism, he was not in a position to put forward such difficult speculations. But true mysticism is a hidden life with God, and not a theological teaching; and for this reason Francis, even though he produced no mystical system, was none the less a mystic, and must clearly be placed amongst its greatest representatives of all time. The Poverello's mysticism is most obvious because he lived it so uncompromisingly. His whole being is nothing less than mysticism. Francis is the personification of Christian mysticism: in him it has become a human being. Francis often fell into ecstasies and at

such times a supernatural light surrounded him. "Then the whole man was a prayer, not only a praying man,"<sup>112</sup> wrote Celano; and Buonaventura adds, "He seemed to be consumed like a fiery coal in the flame of heavenly love."<sup>113</sup> The enchanting perfume which is peculiar to his legend arises from Christian mysticism. Also his emblematic thought, through which he became the creator of the prayer before the Cradle, becomes clear from this. It is the thinking from the heart, not with the head, that is manifest in Francis. He never postulated that people would be different if they used their reason a little more. In him we find no trace of parched intellectualism. Although scholasticism at that period stood at its zenith and the Church-adopted Aristotelianism had liquidated Augustinianism, these things did not disturb the mystical Francis, who considered intellectual knowledge as a limited and imperfect form of life.<sup>114</sup> Francis' ecstatic intuition, which must not be identified with normal sensation, as this can in certain circumstances also drive a man to madness, once more illuminated, for a short moment, that white Christianity, which in other respects had been so strongly darkened by black Christianity.

The climax of Francis' mystical experience can be seen in the event which took place on Mount Alverna. What actually happened on that mountain in September, 1224, no one can tell to-day. Francis was alone, and there were no inquisitive witnesses to this mysterious occurrence. He gave no details to anyone. The event must have been of a terrifying nature, and there is no possible analogy anywhere else in history. The crucified Christ, presumably in the form of an Angel, appeared to Francis, and inflicted with burning rays the marks of the Wounds upon his hands, his feet, and his side. A fuller description of this miracle is impossible. After his ecstasy, Francis bore the same marks of suffering upon his body as Jesus. The symbol of Christ had found its greatest identity, so that it had now become bodily visible. The stigmata cannot be doubted, despite the critical voices that have been brought to bear upon it. The testimony of Elias of Cortona "was written in the presence of the corpse."<sup>115</sup> The stigmata was the result of the relationship with Christ in which Francis tirelessly exhausted himself, and in which he did not spare himself in the least. A mystical transformation, which finally took effect in bodily form, crowns this burning preoccupation of Francis for Jesus. This enigmatic grace, with which the Poverello became exalted above all earlier Saints, cannot be explained rationally. The refusal to give such an explanation does not imply any evasion. Emblematic truth can hardly be translated into comprehensible speech without suffering a distortion. Mount Alverna is as little of a scientific problem as Gethsemane. Before this lofty mystery, which even the thirteenth century could not regard as other than an unheard-of wonder, awed reverence is the only possible attitude. One can already observe this silence in his first biographers: "Although we can feel something of it in ourselves, no words are adequate to express it, because it would be soiled and besmirched by daily things; and perhaps it had, on this account, to appear in his flesh, because it could not be expressed in words. Therefore silence must speak, where words would shatter."<sup>116</sup>

Soon after Francis had received the marks of the Wounds, he became blind. The inner light extinguished the outer. They could not remain in each other's presence. The Saint had been a very sick man for a long time past, as the result of his severe asceticism. Since turning his back on the world, his health had left much to be desired. We hear of a malady of the stomach, which made him vomit blood, of painful eye-aches, which the doctors treated in the most inhuman manner, and of dropsy, which caused him excruciating pain. His condition grew visibly worse, and the Poverello was not the man to be deceitful about his discovery. Francis felt himself inwardly so much in union with God, that "he was equally contented with death and with life."<sup>117</sup> This forty-four year old man looked on death without the slightest fear. As death grew nearer, he spoke a word, which at the first instant could hardly be believed, and yet it is so truly Francis-like that only he could have uttered it: "Welcome, my Brother Death."<sup>118</sup> The most overwhelming victory that a man can achieve lies enclosed in this short phrase, and with it Francis achieved a final greatness. No fantastic speculation of putting away death occupied his thoughts. In an inconceivable way he had drawn into his brotherhood the dry bones from which all men experience a numbing terror; and thus, without solving the difficult problem of death—for no man can do that—he had answered it out of his devoutness. Instead of putting up an inner defence, he pressed death, too, lovingly to his breast. What a superiority lies in this Saintly gesture! Man can only regard this enlightened death with trembling joy. Francis demanded to be laid naked on the bare earth "so that he could struggle naked with the naked in his last hours."<sup>119</sup> In addition to this, he ordered the Brothers to sing the song of Brother Death, although Elias of Cortona considered, with false solemnity, that such singing should not take place in the hour of parting. Nevertheless, the Brothers sang the last lines of the *Hymn to the Sun*:

*Praised be Thou, my Lord, through our sister, bodily death,  
From whom no living man can escape;  
Blessèd are they who are in Thy Holy Will,  
Then shall the Second Death do them no harm.*

On October 3rd, 1226, Francis "greeted death with a song,"<sup>120</sup> thus achieving, even on his death-bed, a Christ-like triumph.

## VII

The religious assimilation of Francis' life demands another mode of reading, than that to which modern man, with his fleeting glance skimming through the latest news, is accustomed. It needs an additional inner contemplation, such as the Saint himself practised, who read no further, when he came to a phrase which excited him, but, more often than not, shut the book, and meditated on the context, so as to lose nothing of its invaluable meaning. "He called this way of reading and learning fruitful,

and liked not to rummage about among a thousand discourses."<sup>121</sup> This practice demands a new orthography which springs from the heart, and continually strives to make what has been read fruitful to one's own inner life.

Francis once spoke of men who "only wished to receive honour and praise from the reading aloud and the enunciation of the works which the Saints had accomplished."<sup>122</sup> Unless one wishes to be guilty of this attitude, one should not value the Poverello only as a man who lived normal Christianity once again in a most extraordinary way. Francis is no phenomenon of the past, to be set up, purely for our admiration. There is still a Franciscan possibility to-day, even if not for the masses, for individuals. The Franciscan method appears from time to time in history, knocks on the door of Christianity, demanding admittance; and when the door is not opened, it disappears for some time until its hour breaks out once more. It is neither reactionary nor revolutionary; it neither blesses the established nor does it raise up barricades. It cuts straight through everything, and transforms the bitter into the sweet, summons the man who is confirmed in religious poverty to freedom, and accords that indescribable joy which arises from the eternal imitation of Jesus Christ. Without storming the world, it raises itself noiselessly from the corners, and debases itself through a higher reality, which restores it back to its place. It depicts, in its genuine form, one of the most radical modes of conduct which exists, and it contains more explosive power than all revolutionary movements, since it calls no counteraction into being. The Franciscan method is an enactment of early Christianity, which gleams out repeatedly in history. Perhaps, too, this method, in the ruins of the shattered West, will no longer be perceived as something quite impossible: for upon this apparent impossibility is based the whole Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

## Joan of Arc

1412—1431

### I

IN THE fifteenth century France lay in a state of deepest abasement. The Hundred Years' War threatened to destroy the entire kingdom. The English armies had already overrun large areas of the land, and the complete occupation of the country appeared to be just a matter of time. The inordinate length of the war was having an appallingly demoralising effect upon the people. Fields were untilled, and whole districts fell into ruin. Terrifying famine and pestilence, which no one knew how to combat, spread far and wide. Life was desperate in this France at the mercy of savage armed bands, and the country groaned heavily under the scourge of a war which appeared to have no end. Even in those villages which lay outside the direct path of the fighting, the entire population was often forced to flee from the approaching enemy; and frequently the hapless villagers would return home to find nothing but a heap of ruins. A most unhealthy effect was produced, too, by internal lack of unity. The French nation, at that time, was torn by countless dissensions: Burgundy was openly on the side of the enemy; and the Dauphin had not yet been crowned, and even his closest adherents cast aspersions on the legitimacy of his birth. The time seemed to have arrived when France would become a vassal state to England. The brightly coloured autumn of the Middle Ages seemed to herald in this tragic end for the land of St. Louis.

It was against this historical background that Joan of Arc appeared. She did not spring suddenly out of nothingness, but was obliged to emerge, by reason of historical events. And her appearance represents one of the most remarkable occurrences in French history. From the moment of her appearance, all the interest which one had taken until then in the political events of the late Gothic century, disappears at a single blow: everything revolves round the figure of Joan. She dominates the historical stage so overwhelmingly that a single word from this enigmatical maid is important to us, and we would like to know the smallest details of her life. All other events are overshadowed by her singular personality, which rapidly grew into something so unusual that it leaves all our normal conceptions far behind.

Joan draws exclusive attention to herself because she represents Heaven's answer to her country's cries of despair. This is not just a posthumous interpretation, for she, too, viewed her life in this light. Even during her lifetime her opponents often hurled the reproach at her "that in her presence many venerated her as a Saint."<sup>1</sup> Whether this spoken





claim to be the Heaven-sent messenger, bringing a message of liberation to her time and country, be correct or not, anyone wishing to expatiate on Joan must first be quite clear on this subject. Most of the portrayals of the Maid in literature suffer, with the exception of the works of a few recent French writers, from their obscurity on this decisive question. The authors do not know whether to treat Joan as a supernatural Saint, a militant Amazon, or a purely pathological case. Completely baffled, they vacillate between these various, contradictory points of view, are unable to decide for any one attitude, and end up by mixing them all together. This is why the picture of Joan acquires that disjointed sketchiness which, in some of the countless monographs on the Pucelle, leaves one with such a feeling of dissatisfaction. But such confusion is very alien to her. If there has ever been a person who knew during her lifetime exactly who she was, and what she wanted, that person was Joan. She was cast in a single mould. In her case, the religious and military life does not split into two parts. On the contrary, they are rather an integral part of each other, and unite to produce an indivisible unity. The martial stage develops from the saintly, as fruit grows from blossom. With Joan everything was directed to a single goal. It is essential to understand her as a saintly figure: and if we are to treat her in all earnestness there cannot be the slightest doubt on the matter. Only an understanding which regards her solely as a Saint can achieve that religious resolution which alone enables her personality to be correctly assessed. "With her, perfect purity entered history."<sup>2</sup> Her saintliness, of course, does not conform to the traditional scheme: it exploded, with incomparable violence, all other impressions of Saints.

Joan is different from the other Saints, because in her case no inner growth can be observed. She was inwardly prepared, at the moment of her first public appearance, and she remained so to the very end. There could hardly have been room for development in such a short space of time. More happened during Joan's life than others could experience during the course of several centuries. When we ask ourselves over what length of time this whole coloured pageant, this pulsating life, and this black night were enacted, we suddenly realise that it all happened within the space of a few months. The fact that Joan was only accorded a single year to accomplish her mission is an essential factor in the dramatic value of her life. Like a Russian novel, the events follow on in swift succession, and the most important things are compressed within the shortest possible space of time: then it is all over. We are left with the sheer impossibility of describing the impression we have received, and we can only resort to words of frank amazement: for yet again did a Saint bring an answer from Heaven to sorely harassed men; and it was this alone which put an end to their distress.

## II

It is possible to give only a very incomplete picture of Joan's youthful years at Domrémy. Very few reliable facts are known. As was the custom in the country, she must have worked from early childhood. Even though

her family were in comparatively easy circumstances, her household duties must still have been hard and strenuous. She herself has said, "I worked in the house, and did not go out into the fields with the sheep and cattle."<sup>3</sup> Joan never went to school, and throughout her life she never knew the letter A from B. Her great religious gift, at this period, was spent entirely within the bounds of village piety, and was watched over by her mother. Joan was everywhere beloved for her moral way of life. She was a zealous churchgoer, and would scrupulously go down on her knees in the open country to say her prayers when she heard the Angelus sound. Her fresh naturalness was far removed from any sort of pompous artificiality. She was probably by no means a gentle child; she was a sturdy girl, and her passions could readily be aroused on occasions. Quite untroubled, she took her part in the pagan customs which the villagers practised after the manner of all peasants. She participated, with her playmates, in all the village festivities, whenever the opportunity arose. She herself once remarked: "I certainly sang there more than I danced."<sup>4</sup> Joan led the typical life of a peasant girl in every respect. But it is pointless to waste too much time on her early history since it serves no useful purpose.

We have little knowledge of her physical appearance. Her contemporaries speak of a peasant face, and a stocky body: she does not seem to have been particularly beautiful, and women were never jealous of her. Posterity, unfortunately, has no authentic picture of her, and even if there were one it would be of little help in interpreting the Maid. What it was that raised Joan from her peasant surroundings and made her one of the most fascinating characters in world history cannot be adequately described. Words seem singularly inept, moreover, since everything took place in a setting which is completely devoid of all historical detail.

The decisive hour in Joan's life was undoubtedly the occasion when, a girl of thirteen, she stood at noon one summer's day in her parents' garden, and suddenly heard a clear, ringing voice at her right hand. Simultaneously she was bathed in a shaft of light more blinding than the light of the sun. Joan saw the figure of a supernatural being, who "was accompanied by many Angels from Heaven."<sup>5</sup> A fearful awe overwhelmed her, for she did not know what had happened to her. The heavenly figure then revealed himself to the frightened maid as the mighty Archangel Michael, he who, according to the Revelation of St. John, had fought with the dragon, and who, as recorded in the Book of Daniel, will raise his sword once more to protect his people in the time of their greatest distress on the Day of Judgment. St. Michael promised a visitation from St. Catherine and St. Margaret, who, as early Church martyrs, were among the fourteen Helpers in times of distress, and who held a very high place in men's faith, towards the end of the Middle Ages. The trembling sensation of fear was changed into an indescribable happiness, and Joan, overpowered by an exultant joy, "kissed the ground"<sup>6</sup> where the Archangel had stood. "As he went away from me, I wept, and I wished that he had taken me with him."<sup>7</sup> Soon after this, the Archangel's promise was fulfilled: the two crowned Saints appeared to the simple village maiden, and

revealed their names to her. Not only once was Joan honoured by a visit from the two Saints, but on many occasions—sometimes more than once in the same day. They held converse with her in an indescribable atmosphere, for which there is no possible comparison.

This religious experience, which took place at the beginning of Joan's life, and which represents her Call, is veiled in impenetrable secrecy. The peasant maid, like Jeremiah, was chosen by Heaven; and this lent a Heavenly nobility to her whole life. Like the Old Testament Prophet, she was spoken to by the Eternal Powers. From that moment onwards, Joan's life is to be understood in the light of this holy summons. Whoever fails to recognise this will necessarily be unable to portray her correctly. The tremendous and the marvellous had entered into her destiny. She herself clearly felt that she was to be taken out of her ordinary life. In her silence regarding it, she showed a true understanding of her chosenness. Joan felt no particular urge to inform the world immediately of her spiritual experience, and despite her tender years she kept this unusual occurrence to herself as a holy secret. She took neither her mother nor her Father Confessor into her confidence. On this subject she desired no priestly support. The young girl tried to prepare herself for her vocation entirely on her own. This silence is worthy of note, for it reveals, at an early age, the religious independence which is always characteristic of her. At a later date, too, she took care to speak of this great hour of her life in monosyllables, adapting her utterances to the understanding of others.

From this spiritual call ensued the greatest thing which a mortal could possibly experience; and the irresistible consciousness of her mission was the sign of its truly prophetic nature. Joan believed that she had a mission to fulfil, a mission to which she, and no one else, was destined. She did not claim this out of vain ambition, as we may see from the deep earnestness with which she herself regarded it. It had been entrusted to her by God. The Almighty had created her expressly for His purpose, and she acted upon His command. "I would rather have been torn to pieces by horses, than have come to France without the permission of God."<sup>8</sup> No expression is to be found more frequently on her lips than the suggestion of her supernatural mission. It was this awareness of an authorised mission which inspired her: she flashed out like a meteor, and as swiftly vanished away. The royal feeling of having been sent drove her forward, and from this feeling flowed her triumphant faith, and her ability to make others share it. It was of secondary importance to Joan whether or not other men were also convinced of her consciousness of her mission. "I do not know whether those of our party believe it, and I leave it to their own hearts. But even if they do not believe it, it is still true that I have been sent by God."<sup>9</sup> All the unusual features of her life are only to be explained by this magnificent though dangerous feeling of having a mission; and it is the one thing in which she should never be imitated. This, the most glorious of all glorious convictions, is separated by only a hair's breadth—the dividing line between true and false—from the psychopath's repulsive urge to self-assertion.

Joan's mission had a concrete content. The Saint had recourse to no paltry speeches, such as are sometimes forthcoming in the case of the spiritualistic lucubrations of the occultists. Hers was not a conversation which centred around personal questions, nor did the Heavenly Angels say things to her, from which one might claim that they merely represented her subconscious wishes. It was far more a spiritual and impersonal speech, from which she, too, received a clarity of spirit, and which gave rise to incalculable consequences. The powers of Heaven demanded that she hasten, without respite, to the aid of the King of France, and that she save her direly threatened Fatherland. The extraordinary dialogue which they sustained revolved around the holy France which Louis had known, that great, immortal France, which no one can forget, once he has known it. The question of whether France, especially beloved of God, exists, in fact does not arise. For Joan this most Christian France was anyway beyond discussion, and her picture of the King has necessarily to be modified, since it does not conform to reality. To save her threatened homeland: this was the national task with which she had been entrusted. Whether her motives were inspired by religion or by love of her country is a question which she herself could never have understood. Piety and patriotism, for Joan, were not two distinct things, since, in her world of images, she dwelt in a patriotism which was founded on religion, and was a command from God. To rescue a menaced country from disaster was a colossal task for an ignorant, half-grown peasant girl; and Joan, too, quailed, to a certain extent, before it. It is a sign of the genuineness of her call that at first she drew back, fearful of a demand which seemed to border on madness. "I am only a poor girl, and I understand nothing of horsemanship or of military matters."<sup>10</sup> She shared these preliminary misgivings at Heaven's command with the Old Testament prophets, Moses, Jeremiah, and Jonah. And her feeling proves, more clearly than anything else, that Joan was not just the victim of her own pretensions, and that she must have been urged to her work by Higher powers. For she herself, unaided, would have been quite incapable of fulfilling this fantastic task, which, until then, had baffled all the efforts of the best men in France. She had immediately summed up the greatness and the difficulties of her sacred charge. The Heavenly counsels, however, did not allow of any demur. Ever more and more importunately, and ever more imperiously, they warned the Maid of God to do her duty. It would have been disobedient, and a sin against a Heavenly command, had she hesitated any longer. And so the Maid of Lorraine finally decided to undertake her task, and, in all good faith, to put her gigantic work into motion. Joan was one of those great believers whose faith can move mountains, and who have understood what the Divine fitness of things requires of them.

It is readily intelligible that the visions of Joan of Arc should at once have drawn great attention to her; and they have given rise to an unending train of arguments and discussions. Many psychological attempts at explaining them have been put forward in the light of modern knowledge. These are not necessarily to be discarded as sacrilege. The hypotheses

which speak of autosuggestion and hallucination are not unilluminating just because they try to solve the problem without taking the metaphysical into account. But the positivist illumination derived is still only an apparent solution to the problem. It collapses in the last analysis, and descends into the realms of the superficial. If we follow the explanations of the psychologists, Joan's disquieting phenomenon will merely be seen with a pathological label attached, which in no way contributes to a deeper understanding of her. By all contemporary accounts, Joan was a healthy peasant girl, who had never practised self-mortification. There is no record of her ever having suffered from neurotic disturbances. Day-dreaming was not suited to her rational way of thinking, and she herself was extremely sceptical of visionary charlatans, as is demonstrated by her critical attitude to Catherine of La Rochelle. Joan's visions have nothing to do with illness, although the pathological is inimical to health. Moreover, the holy visitations were certainly not pathological, even though they go beyond the bounds of the normal.<sup>11</sup> Nor is anything to be gained by the suggestion that Joan's unusual religious imaginative powers, which were of a great poetic intensity, arose from a picture of phantasy, indistinguishable from the world of reality. These explanations embody a tendency which eventually destroys her true figure. People who believe them are unintentionally sharing the opinion which was held by the men who judged her, since they, too, represented her as a frenzied visionary. But they must induce in us great reflection, if we constantly debate these visions, the traces of which, according to Anatole France, have "become lost for ever!"<sup>12</sup> A purely rationalist attitude destroys all such pathological suggestions which inevitably lead to pitiful misrepresentations. They move on another plane to that on which Joan lived. They have shown themselves, despite all their cleverness, to be of little practical use, and allow no new picture to be formed of the Pucelle, which could impress humanity.<sup>13</sup>

The English writer, V. Sackville West, suggests in her dry biography of Joan that the magical attraction of France's national Saint lies in the fact that she "questioned one of the most deep-rooted principles, what we believe or do not believe,"<sup>14</sup> and, we might add, threw them overboard. Joan made use of her unusual influence during her own century, a time which was in no way frivolous in belief, and she still exerts it to-day, when we really come to grips with her. It is no mere coincidence that time and again she has compelled sceptics to fall out with each other, and thus always succeeded in slipping through their fingers. Joan always confronts men with new situations. One cannot get near her if she is to be observed from a purely dogmatic or rationalistic viewpoint. But in the soul of the man who approaches her impartially, something new will be born, arising from his study of this Saint. For through her he will find himself obliged to revise his whole outlook on life regarding what is and what is not possible. The service which she can render to modern man is that of luring him away from hard and fast trains of thought.

It is more advisable to leave Joan's visions in all their mysteriousness,

and not to interpret them otherwise than as she saw them herself. It is invariably a hardy enterprise to wish to understand a historical figure better than the figure itself did. In the history of the spirit there are countless phenomena which have been written about, but which can never be satisfactorily explained. Socrates' puzzling Demon, for instance, cannot be understood rationally. And events like St. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus should not have too much light thrown on them, lest their vital atmosphere be destroyed. However paradoxical it may seem we are more enlightened regarding such events when they are left in their own half-light, and when the secret which surrounds them is kept secret. With what modesty and reticence did Joan herself speak of them! Only when she was pressed did she give a few hints, against her will, knowing full well that she could never explain her secret to men. The little that she was able to communicate points to a super-rational, inexplicable event. No one can speak more concisely of her story than Joan herself has done. Naturally, the form of her inner vision was bound up in the conceptual material of her religious education. Joan's visions appear in a very curious light because of their frequency, because of the number of Heavenly beings who appeared to her, and above all, on account of the term "Voices" which has been applied to them. In any case, there is no need to dwell on the pathological notion, when we can refer to New Testament situations such as, "And lo, a voice from Heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Joan used the expression "*son conseil*," and would not be parted from it.<sup>15</sup> The Pucelle did not fall into ecstasies when her visions occurred and so her contemporaries noticed nothing unusual; this also explains why there were never any witnesses available. Everything with her took place noiselessly, but this did not prevent her from occupying herself constantly with her visions, or from bringing to them every sacrifice, with the greatest earnestness of purpose. A difference must be made between the form of vision, and the content of the "counsels" which Joan received. Too literal a description of this unfathomable business merely comes up against the world of symbolic thought to which Joan belonged. None the less it is essential that we should speak of Joan's visions with that reverence which we must learn to display again towards all religious figures; for such reverence is proper to one with whom Angelic Beings have held speech.<sup>16</sup>

Of outstanding importance is the manner in which Joan understood herself in this inner respect. With impressive directness this peasant child was bound to the Heavenly powers whence her inimitable greatness issued. Joan's relationship to St. Catherine and to St. Margaret leaves the normal veneration of Saints far behind. Not only did she call upon the two Saints: she almost lived on the same footing with them, and was constantly counselled and led by them. The Maid stood in a direct relationship to the world of Angels, and from this exalted experience a consciousness of the Divine came to her, an experience which cannot be surpassed. For her the Saints were a reality, far more real than her actual surroundings. More than once she said, "I have seen them with my own eyes as clearly as I see

you now before me."<sup>17</sup> Joan breathed their sweet scent, and once it was even granted to her—O blissful moment!—to embrace the Saints, and to kiss them.<sup>18</sup> After such a mark of grace, we can understand the ineffable joy which at times transfigured her face, and the flood of light which illuminated her. Thanks to the unshakable knowledge of her visions, she could harbour no doubts about their reality. As the result of her direct relationship to the Divine Joan knew no spiritual uncertainty: "I know it through a revelation, as surely as I know that you are now sitting before me."<sup>19</sup> Like St. Paul, she felt herself to be the bearer of a "revelation." In this direct communication with the Divine, and in this religious certainty, lies the basis of her holiness, and not so much in her own self-development, although she was of the opinion "that one can never cleanse the conscience enough."<sup>20</sup> Joan's unapproachable holiness is a consequence of her proximity to the Divine, which permitted her to perform deeds far beyond the ability of man.

After conversations with the Angelic Powers, which lasted for a year, regarding the execution of her mission, Joan judged that the time was ripe at last. But even at this crucial moment, she did not betray a single syllable to her parents of the mighty plans which seethed within her. Any word to them of her intentions would naturally have brought her scheme to naught. Joan's conduct shows that she did not act rashly, but retained a true French clarity of purpose, which accompanied her in all her dealings. She was made up of a strange mixture of overpowering enthusiasm and Gallic clarity of thought and purpose. Realistically enough, she summed up the domestic situation with complete accuracy. Her father must have had some inkling that his daughter was engaged in some monstrous intercourse, and he was visited by dreams in which he saw her being carried off by armed men. He therefore kept a close watch on her, and tried to marry her off; but Joan rejected all thoughts of marriage. She was obliged to testify before the court, on oath, that she had never given a promise of marriage to any man. Joan felt that to remain at home any longer would be unsafe. She had one last struggle of conscience about her parents, and then, at the beginning of the year 1429, left her family for ever without bidding them farewell. "God gave me this order; and therefore it was only right that I should obey it. For since God Himself commanded this, I would have gone, even had I had a hundred fathers and a hundred mothers; even had I been the daughter of a king."<sup>21</sup> This was the only occasion when Joan was guilty of open disobedience. Under the powerful pressure of her visions, she felt herself compelled to obey God rather than man. And with this secret flight from her parents' house, the curtain falls on the first act of the tragedy of Saint Joan.

### III

The carrying out of Joan's mission begins like an old ballad of such great beauty that one never tires of hearing it retold. A magic aura surrounds the event, although this should not be considered as distinct from her Heavenly charge.

Joan first approached an elder cousin, whom she called Uncle, and who lived in the neighbourhood of Vaucouleurs. First she told him of her desires, and then said that she wished to make the acquaintance of a certain knight called Baudricourt, from whom she needed a letter of introduction to the Dauphin. She was still wearing her peasant dress, the well-known red coat, and her conduct was that of a simple country girl. Baudricourt, however, would have none of this fantastic plan, and he advised her cousin to give the Maid a good hiding and send her back home. This was the first opposition which Joan encountered in her public path. The warning that she was to be sent back home did not disturb her in the least, however; she merely became more persistent in her request for a conversation with the knight himself. And when she carried her point, she spoke of her exalted mission with such ardour that Baudricourt was completely won over. Despite himself, he could not help receiving the impression of a supernatural strength opposed to himself, which emanated from the peasant girl. And at the end of their conversation together, the hardened warrior admitted his defeat, and granted the Maid of God's request.

With Baudricourt's assent, Joan changed her red coat for the dark raiment of war—a garment which came down to her knees; and she had her black hair cut in the manner of a page-boy. This change of dress was something quite unheard of in the fifteenth century, and it was later to be laid at her charge as being something shameful. A young girl with short hair, on which was set a pointed cap, clad, moreover, in man's clothing, stood in far too open a contradiction to the commandments of the Old Testament. The angry head-shaking of the men of that period over the daughter of Heaven wearing masculine attire is easy to understand. Joan herself, however, with her fine instinct for the important and the unimportant, gave an apposite answer to all this: "The matter of the clothes is scarcely worth bothering about: that is the least important thing. I have not put on man's clothes on the advice of a man of this world. This, and everything that I have done, was at the behest of God and His Angels."<sup>22</sup> As she wore man's clothes at the instigation of God, her conscience was clear, whatever might have been written in the Book of Deuteronomy (22, v). She herself found it more decent to perform her soldierly duties in a soldier's dress, because they were duties which concerned men, and they gave her the opportunity of fitting in with their way of life. Yet Joan, even in uniform, had nothing of the robust masculine woman about her. That she was not free from all feminine characteristics is borne out by the frequent mention of her womanish voice, and by her ready tears. But everyone found it quite impossible to covet her carnally. The love conflict, which Schiller, in his misunderstanding of Joan, has made into a poem, is completely devoid of any historical basis, and is to be encountered for the first time in the literature on the Saint which appeared in the seventeenth century. Before the inexplicable greatness of her God-inspired appearance, all sexual desires were stilled. The majestic knowledge of her mission allowed no irreverent thought to arise in her presence, and it

spread a great shyness about her. The Saint, as it were, shimmered through her warlike costume, and allowed her religious virtue to shine through it; and from this alone can her great influence be understood.

With two companions, Joan rode on horseback to Chinon. This adventurous journey, which took several days, led her through enemy-occupied territory. However, she showed at once, in this first test, that she was capable of enduring the greatest hardships. She never complained of weariness, and proved herself capable of soldierly endurance. Only occasionally did she whisper into the ears of her companions that she would like to hear Mass, wherewith she placed on record yet again her indissoluble ties with the religious world. She passed through the English lines unrecognised, and rode into Chinon on the eleventh day.

In this town dwelt Charles VII, at that time Dauphin of France. To judge by Jean Fouquet's portrait, he seems to have been a king, tired in body and soul, with an ugly nose and foolish eyes—the epitome of a bored human being. He was, moreover, an incompetent prince, with nothing of royalty about him. He obviously cared less for France than for a quiet life. He put forward his claims negligently, and could never succeed in shaking off his lethargy. In his morose sluggishness he felt far from thrilled at Joan's arrival, and the one thought which occupied his mind was how to get rid of her as soon as possible. Two completely different types of human being thus confronted each other in these two persons. "Joan always acted in the grand manner, although she was only a peasant maid; whereas Charles VII, although he was a prince, always acted as a petty man."<sup>23</sup>

Joan experienced greater opposition from Charles VII than she had done from Baudricourt. Ignoring her burning impatience to fulfil her appointed mission, the Dauphin postponed her audience for two days. We must not reproach Charles for meeting her with critical reservations, for this was obviously his duty, in view of the girl's fantastic claim. But a far greater slur must be cast on his character for his dishonest treatment of her. Even at their first meeting, he used a ruse in an attempt to deceive her. A nobleman was ordered to sit on the throne, while Charles himself went and stood amongst the courtiers. Joan was led into the throne-room by the light of fifty torches. An atmosphere of tense anticipation seized hold of the three hundred people who were present. The peasant girl showed not the least perplexity before this princely assembly: from the very first moment she was completely mistress of the situation. She went directly over to Charles, knelt down before him, and gave him the name which has always remained to her: "*Gentil Dauphin*," she said, "*j'ai nom, Johanne la Pucelle*." Charles again tried to deceive her, by pointing to the nobleman who was sitting on the throne. Joan was not to be taken in, however, and replied with conviction, "In the name of God, noble Prince, you are he, and none other." General surprise reigned in the throne-room over this recognition at first sight. The Dauphin, too, was impressed, even though he was by no means convinced. And when she went on to give him a piece of confidential information which only he could know, he must have been even more surprised, for he stood there, in front of her, with a look

of complete and depressing lack of comprehension. He was unwilling to recognise her claim to be a messenger from Heaven, sent by God to help France; nor was her religious nationalism any more agreeable to him, since it implied that he should bring his kingdom to God, and finally rule over it as the representative of the Saviour. Charles did not understand that France was to be a "holy kingdom." In contrast to his attitude, Joan's renewed arguments showed to what an extent religious conduct was the foundation of all her words and deeds. Instead of being glad that someone had been sent to help him in his great distress, Charles could only produce a thousand and one objections, and hold up the Pucelle for weeks on end.

First of all he wished to assure himself, by means of some kind of test, of the nature of the person with whom he had to deal. The question to be cleared up was whether Joan was really an accredited messenger of Heaven, or, in fact, an agent of Hell. Two ladies of the court were entrusted with the task of certifying to Joan's virginity, since mediaeval superstition maintained that the Devil could not use virgins as witches. The Pucelle permitted this intimate procedure to take place, and then, of her own free will, underwent yet another unpleasant examination: the clergy were to establish whether she really was a true daughter of the Church. Joan was subjected to a cross-fire of interrogation by high ecclesiastical dignitaries, and submitted to a real theological examination. Its course went quite smoothly. She had to overcome misgiving after misgiving in order to fulfil her mission despite her fellow-men. The uneducated peasant girl naturally had no notion at all of the innumerable theological intricacies which the prelates put before her. But her natural intelligence served her so well in this predicament, that she did not fall into any of the traps set by her scholastic questioners. Unfortunately the report of this examination has never been unearthed to this day. We can only reconstruct a general outline of the affair from the testimony of two witnesses. Joan comported herself with fearless assurance, and replied with an undaunted spirit to the often quite absurd questions of these learned gentlemen. To one of her examiners, who spoke French with a strong dialectal accent, and who wished to know in what language the Angel had spoken to her, she replied, with the ready wit of a peasant, "In better French than yours!" And when the gentleman whom she had thus shown up went on, in an irritated voice, to ask whether she really did believe in God, she cheerfully rapped him over the knuckles again with, "Yes: more than you do." There were also ticklish situations when Joan sat haughtily at the end of her bench, and refused to answer the questions put to her. The position was dangerous, too, when she opposed her own inner illumination to the teaching of the Church, and when she threw at the heads of the clergy the enlightening phrase which sprang from her very soul: "In the book of Our Lord is written much more than in all your books."<sup>24</sup> With this magnificent retort the deep rift that stood between Joan and the ecclesiastical authorities became clear for a moment. Without any doubt the comparison between the books of God and those of the Church smelt suspiciously of heresy; and it says much for the good nature of the doctors of Poitiers that they

shelved this tricky point on the agenda. Finally, however, after three weeks of this, Joan, thirsty for action, lost her patience, and declared that she had not gone there to argue. She requested to be led to the fighting men, and promised to give them the "sign" which they demanded of her. The doctors of theology all agreed that they found nothing suspicious in her. But Joan always retained an unpleasant memory of this theological examination, and, in spite of her spiritual disposition, she never fully understood the clergy. "I thank Our Lord," she said on one occasion, "that He has freed me from the tortures of the clerics of our party."<sup>25</sup>

At last a small force was placed at Joan's disposal. She herself acquired a new sword, which she had had fetched from the Church of St. Catherine at Fierbois, and which she had foretold would be found in a rusty condition buried beneath the flagstones under the High Altar. The fulfilment of this prophecy considerably increased her prestige. But far more important to Joan than the sword was the banner, made out of coarse linen. "Much more precious to me than the sword—forty times more precious—was the banner," she insisted.<sup>26</sup> When she had joined the troops, she ordered these foul-mouthed, hard-drinking men to the Confessional, saying that God would only give victory to a pious army. The prostitutes, who followed the troops, also had to be disbanded, and at a later date Joan herself struck one of them across the back, using the flat of her sword so lustily that the blade broke in two. She regarded her military life just as Oliver Cromwell and Gustave Adolphus did; and she never for one minute forgot, even when in camp, that she was inspired by the powers of Heaven.

When Joan arrived before Orléans the wind suddenly changed, so that the troops were able to cross the Loire in their boats: this would seem to have been the first "sign," the one which she had already foretold. Joan was received by the citizens of Orléans with indescribable joyfulness. She entered the besieged city in the evening, clad in full armour, and mounted on a white horse. For days on end the people of Orléans were in a high state of excitement, and in their joy they nearly broke down the door of the house where she had taken up residence. Time and again the Maid was obliged to show herself; and on the occasions when she walked through the town, she could scarcely advance, so great was the press of townspeople. Since her entrance into Orléans a new factor had begun to operate in Joan's life. This factor must not be overlooked, even if, in itself, it is not sufficient to provide a complete basis of explanation: this was her handling of the masses. It is quite certain that the Pucelle did not act as the result of mature deliberation; nor, on the other hand, did she use mass suggestion, like a common demagogue. Nevertheless, subconsciously, she understood crowd psychology to perfection. The relationship was a double one: Joan knew how to get something out of the crowd, for she could beat the living sparks out of the dead embers; and the crowd itself had its own effect on Joan, who was carried high upon its waves. This double exchange of influences must be noticed, or much will inevitably remain misunderstood.

We must not paint too exaggerated a picture of Joan's military position

in Orléans. She neither had an army under her command, nor did she possess any military rank. The French field officers treated her with visible reserve. She was hardly ever called upon to assist in the conferences of the military leaders. It is even doubtful if she understood anything at all of the problems of strategy, although she has been described by her best comrade-in-arms, the Duke of Alençon, as being experienced in military matters, and although on occasions she dared to contradict professional soldiers. In point of fact her entire knowledge of military affairs came from her sound innate knowledge of men. The dispositions taken by her must have been based far more on her intuition than on logic. In this assertion the supernatural character of her mission is not merely being hinted at, rather is it to be underlined. Joan brought her magnificent achievements to fruition without any knowledge of strategy, and without having any position of command. This fact heightens the inexplicability of her achievement. For the Pucelle, this struggle was a religious event; it was to her political and theological way of thinking a crusade, undertaken at the bidding of the All Highest. And in accordance with this, one must not fight on a Sunday, or one will be attacked. Joan aroused a new and tranquilising enthusiasm in the French army thanks to her religiousness; and this was at least as important as were tactical considerations. The religious consciousness of her mission by no means prevented the Maid from speaking extremely coarsely on occasions, and in a way which the soldiers, too, could understand. Not that she forgot her dignity; but she could menace a recalcitrant soldier, and make mincemeat of him if he did not co-operate with her instructions. With all her holiness, there was nothing insipid about her. At all times she stood "in lively intercourse with two worlds—as a missionary to the one, and as an influence upon the other, so that she had thus to be doubly equipped for her two vocations."<sup>27</sup> She was able, as few men have been, to change discord into unity. The inexplicable element of her military career is founded upon her converse with the Angels. Their "counsels" were always with her, and were not at all swallowed up in the whirlwind of a soldier's life.

From Orléans she caused a letter to be sent to the English, demanding that they should retreat forthwith, and that did they not do so, "We shall raise such a mighty outcry as has not been heard in France these thousand years."<sup>28</sup> Joan was filled with a righteous desire to shed as little blood as possible, and so her warlike actions were always preceded by a demand for the enemy to leave the country. The English scornfully rejected such unreasonable requests, and bombarded her with insulting epithets, such as "Cow Maid," "Whore," and "Witch;" whereat the seer of Domrémy burst into tears. Joan then commanded that any change in the position of the enemy troops should be communicated to her at once. One day, however, while she was drowsing, she came to her senses suddenly with the feeling that there was fighting going on before the gates of the town. Quickly putting on her clothes, she rushed out of the house, and, for the first time in her life, witnessed a battle. When she saw the blood of her countrymen flowing, she became wildly excited, and her natural courage

mounted immeasurably. "Forward! Storm the walls!" rang Joan's cry; and she was herself the first to set foot on the scaling-ladder. The sight of the Maid, inflaming the men to battle, was quite unprecedented, and had its results. The French, dispirited by countless defeats, had scarcely any more confidence in battle. But now a great war-cry ran through their ranks as a consequence of the Pucelle's remarkable vigour. Forgetting their inferiority in numbers, they flung themselves with renewed courage against the enemy, and what had not happened for an unconscionable length of time now happened over night: the French were victorious, and captured an enemy strongpoint for the first time. In the skirmishes of the following days, the French held the field. Joan was among them, and never left their side, not even when an arrow struck her in the shoulder. Although she wept many tears at the first shock of the blow, she bravely withdrew the arrow from her shoulder, and then rejoined the fray. The battle went on until the English, after a week's fighting, abandoned the siege of Orléans, and were forced to retreat in full flight. The town was freed from the enemy. Joan's first prophecy had been fulfilled. And in gratitude for her great deed, the achievement of which borders on the miraculous, she has gone down to history as the "Maid of Orléans."

Joan's nature was far too active to allow her to rest contented with this first success. She felt herself compelled urgently forward, and her dynamic temperament forced her on from deed to deed, until the whole of her Heaven-sent mission was accomplished. Without pausing, she pushed onward, and we might almost speak of her advance in terms of a modern *blitzkrieg*. Space does not permit us to give all the details of her further campaigns, which followed one another in rapid succession, and some of which were remarkable for their imaginative boldness. Over all these campaigns waved the banner with its inscription, *Jesus-Maria*, showing in Whose name they were being fought. Joan was everywhere successful, despite the inadequate support which she received from the King, who followed reluctantly in her wake. Something irresistible had come over the Maid, and nearly every day she was able to announce some new victory. Just as the walls of Jericho collapsed before the trumpet blasts, so did towns often give themselves up merely at the approach of the Pucelle. Fortress after fortress fell. The terrified English bowmen, victors at Poitiers and Agincourt, were overcome by a numbing fear, and there were mass desertions from their ranks. It is impossible to describe the terror and the amazed wonder which the Divinely-inspired maiden aroused in those about her. There is no parallel in history to what this seventeen-year-old peasant girl accomplished in the space of a few weeks. The story of the two months during which Joan led her troops from the Loire to the northernmost parts of France belongs to the most glorious page in the history of French arms during the whole of the Hundred Years' War. To attribute these brilliant successes to the ambiguous politics of Trémoille, is to betray as grotesque an ignorance of the historical facts as is the attempt to turn Joan into a pawn in the hands of crafty men. The turn of the tide in that long drawn out war centres entirely on Joan: she is one of

the great makers of world history.

In the swift race to victory, Joan led her King to Rheims to have him crowned there. This was her second principal objective after the relief of Orléans; and this feat, too, she achieved. The erstwhile peasant girl stood beside the King at his coronation, holding the standard in her hand; and all eyes were turned upon her. She was dressed in a magnificent robe, for she possessed a visible love for beautiful costumes, which makes her figure sympathetically human. The coronation day represents the zenith of Joan's public career, for it gave her the satisfaction of having fulfilled the will of God. No pride which might have been so near to hand, marred her work; for even now she was completely single-minded in her purpose: "I have been sent to comfort the poor and the destitute."<sup>29</sup>

The relief of Orléans and the liberation of a great part of France, and the crowning of the King are certainly important events, which no one should underestimate; but far more apposite than these external events is the spiritual transformation which was being completed in all these actions, and which it is not easy to specify. When we reflect upon Joan's military phase, we are immediately faced with the questions: Had she no knowledge of the sinfulness of war? And of the nameless suffering which it entails? Did she not realise the incompatibility of Christianity and war? Can the strife of battle ever be in harmony with holiness? As against these weighty questions, it may be suggested that in Joan's case the problem was rather different. Her country was in distress, and, indeed, the greatest danger. At this critical, harrowing moment the Pucelle sprang into the breach at the command of God, and brought about the rebirth of a downtrodden France. This is fundamentally different from the idea that she was supporting a conquering nation in her aggressions. Anyway, the fact is that Joan became, as a result of this, a national Saint. And by her saintliness she transfigured the natural love of country, which is, in itself, a gift from God, but which is so often corrupted through the fanaticism and egoism of men. In the midst of her passionate, wordless patriotism, Joan never became chauvinistic, since only France herself had any value to her. She implored God to send His wrath against her enemies. And there is no mistaking her meaning when she said, "Whether God loves or hates the English, or what He intends with their souls—of these things I know nothing."<sup>30</sup> Joan can never be pointed to as a supporter of war. She had nothing in common with bloodthirsty men. According to one account, she never killed a man. The flowing of blood in war made her heavy-hearted, and she wept stormy tears over the men who had died without receiving the last Sacraments. She had also the greatest compassion on the souls of the English. And she comforted a wounded Englishman, who died with his head in her lap. It was not in the least any desire for the gains of war, which led Joan into battle. Had she been inspired by this motive, it would not be worth while wasting a single word over her. She did not love war for war's sake, even though, at this juncture of her life, it claimed a large part of her thoughts; she loved this war only because it was inevitable for the liberation of her occupied country, and because it was the task which

had been entrusted to her by Heaven. Never did she forget the words of her Saints, without whose aid she could never have done her work. Her warlike achievements are the fruit of her visions of them.

Joan, of course, had certainly devoted herself to this soldierly task with an Old Testament-like matter of factness. With the devotion which only dwells in a youthful spirit, she performed her warlike duty. And like all young people, Joan loved nature, and danger, and riding with soldiers, and the freedom of a living soul. How supple and self-assured she was as she sat upon her horse! What a violent attraction to the unusual dwelt within her! In battle she would never give the least heed to protecting herself, but would plunge into the thickest hail of arrows. Her speech was spontaneous, and her gestures natural; and her contemporaries relate how she rode with merry, laughing face beside her troops. An incomparable brightness shines over this phase, which has in it something of the radiance of a summer morning. Joan was a glorious figure, and endowed with magnificent courage. We could shout for joy because of her, so fascinating were the vitality of her soul, the fire of her heart, and the ardour of her spirit! Even Schiller's beautiful phrase, "Thee did the heart create," falls too short; for the Pucelle arose from her encounter with the Divine. Her will broke down all the bonds of tradition. A determination, with the freshness of dew, was all her own. Her soul was ever filled with the desire for new undertakings. All weariness, all banality, were alien to her; and it is quite impossible to escape, for any length of time, from her radiant power. It is a delight to follow her actions, and even the dumbest, sleepest fellow must feel the blood course faster through his veins as he contemplates this Saint. Even Solomon the Preacher did her wrong when he wrote: "One man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all these have I not found." For in this Maid we meet something for which we might seek in vain among a million men. She is one of the greatest flowerings of her sex, in whom are equally balanced greatness of spirit and greatness of heart. It is no wonder, then, that Joan should have been greeted by her contemporary the poetess, Christine de Pisan, in the dithyrambic strains of these words: "So, in the year 1429, did the sun begin to shine anew; and from sadness came joy, and from winter springtide: and all this through a maiden who leaves Esther, Judith, and Deborah, far behind in insignificance!"<sup>31</sup>

A dynamic force without parallel poured out of Joan, increasing men's courage, and filling their imagination. People have sought to attribute to this quality of hers the wild enthusiasm which she was able to impart to her nation. But enthusiasm is something human, and usually flickers quickly out again. There was something supernatural about Joan, which forces one to speak of enthusiasm; but it was, basically, something quite different from pure enthusiasm. Just as it had happened once before, with Bernard of Clairvaux, so, at the appearance of the Maid, did religious enthusiasm burst out, an enthusiasm which released undreamed of strength. Enthusiasm must in no way be confused with artificial stimulants: it comes with elemental power over an age, or it does not come at all; and

it must be regarded as something Divine. In Joan's case it burst out with mysterious unpredictableness like a storm flood, and it achieved the astounding and incomprehensible miracle of the rehabilitation of a France which lay prostrate in the dust. Genuine enthusiasm is always one of the greatest events of history: it is a force which comes from God Himself. It was an undeniable substantiation of Joan herself, by reason of its tremendous power of attraction. And a religious act of the greatest significance was the consequence of this Divine enthusiasm. By means of it, this boyish girl had revived the heroic element of Christianity. Joan never understood the spirit of Christ to be only the "milk of a pious way of thinking." This attitude, which identifies religiousness with the morality of the Philistines, and thus makes Christianity an object of contempt, is a sign of degeneracy. According to Joan the Divine requires something extraordinary of a man: something great, indeed, the very greatest. In her case it had called her to an act of boldness, and she had lived it out according to her own example. She had given back heroism to the soul of Christianity; and herein lies the irresistible magic which still shines from her, to this very day. It is regrettable that in the course of the last few years this heroism has been much misused as a slogan, and, in the last analysis, has been rendered useless, because men will never relinquish their hold over the uncertain. The Saint does not stand in opposition to the heroic attitude, as a weak argument might maintain. Rather does the Saint yearn for the heroic: as witness the knightly St. Maurice, St. George, and others. The Saint embodies, in his being, a new heroism, called Christian heroism, which is born of complete courage, and which, in defeat, shows its real greatness. This union of religion and heroism was given back by Joan to the Christianity of the late Middle Ages; and as a result of this achievement, she soars high above the degenerate age in which she lived. For a fleeting moment she shed her light on the history of Christianity; for a moment Christianity was once more determined to dare the highest.

This enthusiastic heroism not only brought about a far-reaching resuscitation among the last remnants of a prostrate France, but it also showed God once more in the midst of historical events. Not only the Bible is acquainted with Heavenly intervention: the history of later Christianity, too, is inspired by the living breath of God. And God, even to-day, still reveals Himself amid the drama of history. But whether this action of God's is to be heeded to-day is another question altogether. The answer rests on whether religiousness is dead or living. Joan gave the answer of the Saint to the miseries of her time, and it is one which we must heed, for it was God Who acted through her. This is borne out by the Reform Council theologian, Gerson, who said of Joan's miraculous appearance: "This is the Lord's doing. It is a matter of faith to speak for this Maid."<sup>82</sup>

#### IV

To be chosen for a mission from God does not mean being one of His favourite children. Quite the reverse, for it invariably entails the harshest

fate. The emissary is a "plaything of Providence," which uses him for its own ends; as Kierkegaard said on his deathbed: "The days went by in work and tension, and if, in the evening, I was laid aside, it was exceptional."<sup>33</sup> God often deals cruelly with His instruments: for it is not they themselves who are of importance, but God's plans, which are realised through them. Suffering, then, played an essential part in the life of His messenger, Joan, who could not escape from it, any more than other mortals can.

Was this heroine, too, to succumb to the "law of gravity," and to learn how enthusiasm wanes and gradually sinks back into normality? No: she herself did not suffer this, the saddest of all the sad experiences there are. Joan, to the end, was filled with the same spiritual intoxication. Never did the Pucelle lose her heroic readiness to fight for the Eternal to the limits of her strength. But in her immediate surroundings a wretched melancholy caused enthusiasm to decline with ever increasing swiftness. Its fabulous rise was followed by an even quicker fall, and finally buried her beneath its ruin. Thus the curve of her life fell off rapidly in a steep arc; and this had the most shattering consequences.

Her sun had begun to set immediately after the coronation festivities at Rheims. She herself, with her gift for divination, must have felt this, for she is reported to have said that she would last for one year and no longer. She would have preferred to return to her village and join her mother at the spinning-wheel, but she was compelled to carry out her mission to the bitter end, and this meant the expulsion of the last Englishman from her beloved France. Joan was already busy with new plans, aimed at the recapture of Paris, but her projects did not find the necessary support in the King's party. Charles VII was completely satisfied at having been crowned, and he had no interest in conducting any further campaigns. He was not, like Joan, concerned with a Holy France. He obstructed the Pucelle's schemes for the future, and she was continually being forced to bear with his delaying tactics. The campaign against Paris ended in disaster, and soon afterwards the army was disbanded out of hand, owing to lack of money.

The court party, which was inimical to Joan, eventually engineered things so that she commanded only a very small force of men. Nevertheless, the tireless Maid soon took to the field again, allowing herself no rest. Her first action was to hurry to the aid of the little town of Compiègne, which was seriously threatened by the enemy. In the ensuing battle the French were repulsed by the superior numbers of their opponents. Joan had just reached the moat of the fortress, when the soldiers, in their anxiety, raised the drawbridge, and the Maid's retreat was cut off. Surrounded by the enemy, she was torn from her horse by a bowman, and fell into the hands of the Burgundians. This did not happen without a warning from her "counsels," which had foretold the event. Even at this stage the world of Angels did not abandon her.

The imprisonment of the Maid is unspeakably dark, and the pitiful picture of the Saint in her dungeon lies like a nightmare on the soul. The

scene is one of unrelieved gloom, since not one hand was raised to help the Saint. The ungrateful Charles VII made not the slightest effort to free her, but ignominiously left her to her fate. When Joan learned that she was to be handed over to the English, she was seized by a fit of frenzy. In her despair she tried to escape, and threw herself down from the parapet of a sixty-foot tower; but in some remarkable way she received not the slightest injury as the result of her rash leap. She lay on the ground unconscious. At Rouen, the English threw her into an iron cage, and her throat, feet, and hands were chained to a heavy block. She was watched night and day by five English soldiers, who treated her in the roughest possible manner. All the consolations of the Church were denied her. A night of pitch descended over this bright figure, and an unending loneliness cast a shadow over her last months. The deliverer of France was deserted by all, and during her months of captivity, during which she was shamefully treated, she was not granted the least sign of human compassion. Only her brave soul was constant to the last, and the way in which, as a true Saint, she endured the most grievous suffering, is the only ray of light in this deep gloom.

The famous trial, which represents the termination of Joan's extraordinary career, was, of course, a matter of discredit to Charles VII; but we must not, for this reason, regard it merely as a corollary, which had nothing to do with Joan's existence as a Saint. It was an integral part of her life, in the same way that the scene of Jesus before the High Priest cannot be separated from the Gospels. The interrogation of Joan will always occupy the mind of man, just as the trial of Socrates in Athens does. Since the trial of Joan questioned the whole authenticity of her mission, the eyes of Christianity must return to it again and again. In this last act of her tragedy, the Pucelle wrote her autobiography in a way which has never been equalled. No one can possibly say anything more apposite to the problem of Joan than she herself has done through the records of this trial. In the dark pages of her judgment by men she has raised up a memorial to herself infinitely more sublime than any poet or historian has yet produced. Her eternal monument is dressed in the exciting suspense of a trial, and the magic of her being stands forth in such uncompromising vividness that almost we can hear the beating of her valiant heart. The way in which this illiterate girl was able, with bold answers and judicious silences, to meet her hostile judges, is of a greatness which cannot be surpassed. However often we may probe into the agonising cross-examinations, we are invariably dumbfounded yet again by the majesty with which Joan told of her religious mission.<sup>34</sup>

Although Joan was held prisoner in a civil prison, it was the ecclesiastical authorities who were responsible for the trial. She was hauled before the Inquisition. It is enough to say this, if we stop to think what the Inquisition meant during the latter days of the Middle Ages.<sup>35</sup> The course of an Inquisition trial, which permitted no counsel for the defence, and in which the parts of prosecutor and judge were played by the same individual, is so opposed to modern legal conceptions that it is extremely difficult to

understand it with any degree of accuracy. There is something quite revolting in the way the high ecclesiastical dignitaries perverted the name of God in order to encompass the destruction of the holy Maid, and showed themselves willing to hand her over to be murdered in the name of Justice. It is our duty, however, even when dealing with this trial, to prevent ourselves from giving a purely chauvinistic picture in black and white. The inquisitors were obliged to represent the interests of England, and were therefore not free in their judgments. To the English, Joan was an apparition of evil omen, and they regarded her elimination as a political and military necessity. Mere indignation at the darkness of the Middle Ages makes too light of the problem; and if we do not, like Shaw, grasp this point, we will never understand "why Joan was burnt, much less feel that you might have voted for burning her yourself if you had been a member of the court that tried her; and until you feel that you know nothing essential about her."<sup>36</sup> In fact, we must also concede a certain amount of justice to the inquisitors. They were undoubtedly in a most unenviable position, and to a certain extent their legal office was forced on them. It is precisely because the English were partly justified that Joan's trial rose to the level of a true tragedy. The tragic conflict did not lie in the dispute between a righteous man and a rogue, but between right and right. The very fact that one cannot deny all authority to a Church trial operating under English compulsion ties, as it were, a halter round one's neck, and leaves a feeling of catharsis. Yet the contemplation of this relative degree of rightness should not become a drag on both sides, for it overlooks the difference in worth of the opposing parties. Eternal right cannot be dimmed by worldly right; and there can be no question of which comes first, when we attempt to present the situation according to the facts.

On the one hand was the court, under the presidency of a learned bishop, Pierre Cauchon. The inquisition tribunal was much more numerous than usual. Over forty theologians and jurists sat there, with their bald, eunuch faces, looking sharply at the accused, as though stretching out their claws to seize her. These portly "dough-cakes," as a Catholic author has called them, were not all rogues in priests' clothing. Among them were to be found men highly esteemed by the Pope and by the University of Paris. But they were the prisoners of their own system, and, consequently, the murderers of a prophetess. Personally, they did not take the affair lightly. It was no superficial, hurried examination. The court proceeded with thoroughness and the impressive array of pomp and ceremonious scholarship which the Church has at all times known how to employ. Searching examinations were instigated, and different professional opinions courted. Nothing was to be left untried, and the protracted detail of this show trial gave the impression that it was intended to get to the root of the matter. Sometimes the accused was met with an assumed kindness and love, and sometimes with a solicitude for the salvation of her soul, a thing which never leaves the Church indifferent. This lying good-naturedness on the part of the pot-bellied judge elicited the cry from Bernanos: "We would rather have seen her torn to pieces by wolves, than nibbled at by the teeth

of these pedagogic foxes and rats."<sup>37</sup> And this opinion is quite understandable if we bear in mind that not a single witness was called throughout the trial, that the cunning State Attorney crept into her cell disguised as a prisoner, that with cold-blooded perjury the protocol was falsified, and that the verdict had already been decided in advance. "Serious accounts of what happened can only lead to a disqualification of the judge," wrote Huizinga.<sup>38</sup>

Against this formidable array stood the nineteen-year-old girl. From the human standpoint she was as alone as she had always been. With her courage unshaken, her almost proud glance, and her clear eyes, the Maid, wearing her hose and high leather boots, was an almost defiant figure in this, the gravest hour of her life. With her freedom of spirit, overlaid by incomparable irony, she countered the arguments of the learned doctors, and would not yield an inch, although her position was quite hopeless. Undaunted by her grievous imprisonment, she was determined to defend the knowledge of her mission to the utmost. And in this dark hour she rose even higher than in the hours of her heroism on the battlefield. She had, of course, a Helper, Who stood beside her throughout her ordeal, and the Helper spoke to her through those "counsels" which meant more to her than any legal defence counsel. The Heavenly Saints did not desert her: "Not a day passes but I hear the Voices; and I have sore need of these Voices too."<sup>39</sup> Unceasingly the Voices warned her "to accept everything willingly: for it had to be thus."<sup>40</sup> And they gave her an assurance: "Do not despair because of your martyrdom; for when you reach the end of it you will come to the Kingdom of Paradise."<sup>41</sup>

In the judgment hall, where the atmosphere was electric almost to explosion point, a violent struggle ensued between the inquisitors and Joan. It was a struggle which one cannot possibly regard with objective detachment, without being guilty of a criminal lack of compassion. Beneath the surface of this dreary examination there burned an abysmal hatred, which circled nearer and nearer to the ultimate sacrifice. The legal tourney soon took a dramatic turn. On being told to take the oath, Joan made the reservation: "I do not know what you will ask me. It is possible that you will wish to know something, which I may not tell you."<sup>42</sup> There were repeated sharp clashes because Joan did not behave like a frightened girl with whom they could do what they liked. She showed a wild obstinacy which merely infuriated the judge. To the reproach that she had tried to escape, she replied: "Certainly I wanted to escape, and I still want to. Every prisoner has that right."<sup>43</sup> To subtle questions with which they only sought to entangle her, she contented herself by simply saying, "Let us move on to something else." Time and again one is astonished at the courageous behaviour and the intelligence with which she parried all their duellist's feints and thrusts, and the way in which she avoided falling into all their cunningly laid traps. To their insinuations she reacted with a proud self-consciousness. "I come from the side of God, and have nothing to do here. Leave me then to God, from Whom I am come."<sup>44</sup> Joan did not allow herself to be impressed by any parade of academic learning; nor did

she miss any opportunity for a shrewd retort: "You must not imagine that you have the monopoly of light," she cried to her theologian judges, with an expression which clearly betrayed the contempt she felt for the worthy clerics.<sup>45</sup> When the President of the Tribunal pointed out in his most pompous manner all the powers he had over her as an inquisitor, Joan flared up in magnificent anger, and with flashing eyes she flung her answer back at him: "You wish to be my judge, my Lord Bishop. Take heed what you do, for I am truly sent from God; and that places you yourself in the very greatest danger."<sup>46</sup>

Joan had been brought before the ecclesiastical court on the charge of suspected witchcraft. The judge considered the Pucelle as a female who was in league with the Devil; and only when we think of the crime of witchcraft can we understand the horror which the men of the Middle Ages felt for her. In their blindness they saw nothing of Joan's hidden aura. The "Voices" were attributed by them to a Satanic source in which, moreover, she evinced an unwholesome curiosity. Joan, however, was not the person to permit unauthorised people to have a glimpse of her inner self; and she exercised the greatest caution in protecting herself from their carping importunities. On being asked what the Voices had said to her in the last few days, she replied: "They told me to speak and answer courageously."<sup>47</sup> She was not afraid of giving back a direct answer to the court. "Moreover I shall not even tell you all I know. I am much more frightened of making a mistake by saying something which will displease the Voices than I am of answering you."<sup>48</sup> She would rather have had her throat cut than reveal her Divine secret to them. The judges, despite all their wiles and duplicity, were unable to embroil her in the world of the Devil. "Nothing I have done has had any connection with magic or the black arts," she declared with a clear conscience.<sup>49</sup> Demonology played no part in Joan's life. This pure daughter of God must not be connected with the dark powers of the age of the Druids, with which she had nothing at all in common.

With their worn out notions, the inquisitors, in spite of their bewildering interrogation were quite unable to put their fingers on the supernatural essence which surrounded Joan. Eventually the long, dreary trial came dramatically to the question: whether she was ready to submit to the Church's verdict regarding her revelations. "Will you submit to the decision of the Church?" This question was the apex of the inquisitors' examination of Joan.<sup>50</sup> Although now cornered, however, the Maid remained steadfast: "I appeal to Our Lord, Who sent me, to our dear Lady, and to all the blessed Saints of Paradise: I hold that Our Lord and the Church are an indivisible One; therefore it is wrong for you to make difficulties for me in this connection. Why do you make these difficulties, when everything is as one?"<sup>51</sup> They confronted her with the difference between the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant, which she did not understand, since theology meant nothing to her. Unperturbed, Joan replied to the question whether she submitted to the decision of the Church Militant on earth, by saying, "I came to the King of France in the

name of God, of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of all the Saints in Paradise, and of the Victorious Church above us; and at Their bidding, to *that* Church do I submit all my good deeds, and everything else which I have done, shall do in the future. When you ask me if I submit to the Church Militant there is nothing more for me to say."<sup>52</sup> In the face of this crystal clear reply they could elicit nothing further from her. Despite all the pressure which was brought to bear on her, Joan maintained her stand with the greatest pertinacity. She held fast to her statement: "With regard to myself, I submit myself through my acts solely to the Church in Heaven and that means God, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints in Paradise."<sup>53</sup> The great question of "the authority of the Church or the freedom of a conscience bound to God," which was later to be the great inner conflict of Pascal, the other great religious power of France, was another thing which Joan had to resolve. So she did not attempt to embrace them both, for they were poles apart; but with unmistakable clarity she declared for the superiority of her Heavenly Advisers over the visible Church.

For the Inquisition this answer denoted a definite attitude; and from an ecclesiastical point of view, the Inquisition's interpretation was not without reason, and it is not easy to refute the judges in this connection. With her flat refusal to submit to the Church, Joan's situation was undoubtedly grave. Naturally, she did not attack the Church, and being a Saint, she could not have done so. She loved the Church, and longed to serve it to the best of her ability. Moreover the "counsels" required this of her. During the course of the trial she asked to be taken to the Pope, and declared herself ready to appear before the Council of Basle. Her aims, of course, entailed no sort of rebellion against the Church. There was nothing of the spirit of Wycliffe and Huss in her. To try and make her a Protestant out of her before the arrival of Protestantism, would be a disastrous misrepresentation of the truth; she was in no way a forerunner of Protestant teaching. But her faith in the "Catholic Church which is at all times led by the Holy Spirit, which never errs, and is never failing" was subjected by her to the severest tests.<sup>54</sup> As against the "infallibility of Mother Church" she ventured to maintain, according to reports of the trial, that "she was answerable to God alone."<sup>55</sup> This assertion shows that Joan knew the secret of direct contact with God; and this is something that goes far deeper than normal piety: something which had raised her from out of the ranks of ordinary mortals. Priestly intervention was forced to give way in the face of direct contact with God. Although Joan, too, like the mystics of the Middle Ages, did not renounce the institutions of the Church so long as they did not stand in the way of her mission. The Maid had an ardent longing for Mass, but her Divine Visions meant more to her than the Church's communion. In the struggle of conscience over whether she should attend Mass or remain firm to her "counsels" she decided unhesitatingly for the "counsels." "If the Church demands something of me which goes against God's bidding, I shall not do it under any circumstances," she declared, and added, "My Voices did not command me not to obey the Church, but first to obey God."<sup>56</sup> Joan's

ready to believe in the Church; but as regarded her actions, she left herself in God's hands, and in no one else's. She had dealings with the supernatural powers in such a direct and unusual manner that the churchmen of that time, crammed with their scholastic dogma, could not understand her. The grandeur of her direct connection with God shines out of the evidence of her trial. And this alone was the reason why she had no wish to ask for anyone's advice, not even the Church's, as to whether she should believe in her revelations or not.

The unusual claim of being answerable to God direct, and to no one else, had been the battle-cry of the heretics from time immemorial. But this truth was also the greatest act of grace with which God endowed His Saints. The two diametrically opposed poles, the heretic and the Saint, come strangely close to each other in this respect alone. Their attitudes, for once, are similar in this one matter of the closest relationship to God. It is often very difficult to determine the dividing line between the claims of the Saint and those of the heretic. Only if we try to penetrate into her inner life do we realise that Joan was not at all inclined to arrogance, and that she had not the slightest trace of rebellion within her. Her bold approach to God had far deeper roots. Her conscience, which lay in God's hands, forbade her to be false to the mission ordained by the Heavenly Saints; and thus, for a most Holy reason, she came to subordinate the authority of the Church to the higher authority of God. This New Testament kind of classification is in no way related to the subjective attitude of modern men. Joan's apparent subjectivity, in this most earnest of all questions, was actually a pure link with God, and therefore something basically different from modern self-government. Furthermore the Pucelle, by her judicious conduct during the trial, was behaving exactly as she had done during her military life, as a Saint, and nothing else. Not for an instant did she abandon this single line of purpose, which she followed throughout her life. We must not allow ourselves to be seduced by the modern delight in heresy, and suddenly find that we have turned her from a Saint into a religious revolutionary. As the result of her direct contact with God, this Saint allowed herself many times during her trial to be abused as a shameful heretic, without letting the reproaches which struck so terribly on the ears of her contemporaries, disturb her in the least. Had it been necessary, she would have staked her very life on the eternal truths which come from a direct contact with God, and whereof she herself was such a renowned witness.

The inquisitors, however, would not acknowledge the possibility that the claim of being upheld by God Himself could also be the highest grace of a Saint. That they were opposing a Saint in this seemingly heretical guise appeared highly improbable to them, and they did not consider the matter worth discussing. In their appalling blindness, they overlooked the fact that with Joan it was not a question of faith, but simply a firm refusal to accede to an impossible demand, made by an ecclesiastical court. Obedience to a particular conviction of conscience is in any case forbidden according to Catholic precepts, even though this fundamental fact may

occasion tremendous collisions in the practical turn of events, for it was who observe it. So great was the prejudice of the judges against Joan that their bias robbed them of all clarity of thought. By their unscrupulous conduct they were guilty of the greatest injustice, and treated the Saint like a godless heretic. Obviously it is not easy for the Church to recognize Saints; and it is even more difficult if, as in the case of Joan, the Saint appears in a new form which runs contrary to all traditional conceptions. In such an event even an official ecclesiastical body is capable of committing the deadly sin of damning one of God's Saints like a heretic who has made a pact with the Devil. For the Church, too, a certain perspective in time was needed, to be able to see the gold of the Saint, shining through the raiment of the person they had condemned as a heretic. It must be pointed out, however, that the Church has for centuries been fighting for the rehabilitation of Joan, which, with its acute perception, it certainly would not have done, if she had, in fact, been a heretic. The Church was not afraid to upset, in the eyes of the whole world, the findings of an earlier ecclesiastical court (whose decision it had never recognised as infallible), and at last to admit Joan, who had been condemned as a heretic by the Inquisition, as a Saint, in its hagiographical Index. Joan's holiness was so powerful that she reached her goal despite all opposition.

To her contemporaries, however, Joan had condemned herself by her championship of the freedom of a conscience bound to God as against the authority of the Church. The crime of remaining steadfast to her judgment, and of refusing to submit obediently to the Church, was unpardonable, since an attitude which called up God Himself in opposition to the Church was, in the opinion of the inquisitors, harmful to Christian religion. "If the prelates of the Church are not careful," recorded in the trial, "the whole ecclesiastical authority will come to grief and men and women will arise on all sides, pretending that they have received revelations from God and the Saints, while sowing lies and error. This has already happened many times since this woman appeared, and now it has begun to bring scandal among all Christian people."<sup>57</sup> In actual fact the official authorities were dangerously threatened by Joan's attitude. The whole order of things seemed to be on the verge of crumbling. The Middle Ages felt the rift which would develop if this authoritative faith were condoned. The inquisitors hastened therefore to their indictment, in which Joan was described as "witch and sorceress, soothsayer, false prophetess, conjuror up of evil spirits with whom she was in league, superstitious, involved in the black arts and believing in them, thinking falsely regarding matters connected with our Catholic Faith, schismatic, not believing in certain articles, 'A Saint . . . etc.' and doubting several other articles of Faith, therefore heretical, a blasphemer, an apostate of the Faith, etc., etc." Seventy articles were drawn up reproaching Joan for the misdeeds which she was to be found guilty of. These were naturally disputed by Pucelle, who continually insisted on her "vocation from God." Since none of the accusations were based on very flimsy ground, the charges were eventually reduced to twelve articles. The professionals who had

summoned from the University of Paris demanded a condemnation, the Church being completely covered by the knowledge of the time. The only thing missing was an admission of guilt by the accused. This could not be extracted from her even when Joan was led into the torture-chamber and shown all the hideous instruments of martyrdom. Faced with this extremity she resolutely replied: "Of a truth, even if you tear my limbs from each other, and part my soul from my body, I shall not say anything different; and even though I did say something different, I would make it clear that you had forced me to do so by violent means . . . I have asked my Voices whether I should submit to the Church, to which end the clergy have constrained me so violently. The Voices told me that God would help me when I wished; and that therefore I must entrust all my deeds to Him."<sup>59</sup>

After visible hesitation the inquisitors finally brought Joan to the place of execution. Suddenly, in the face of the impending death by burning, Joan lost countenance. She suffered a nervous breakdown. Exactly what transpired cannot be told with any certainty, for a great tumult arose in the place of execution, and the records of the trial show obvious gaps at this point. Joan herself was unable to say afterwards exactly how everything had happened. A previously prepared screed was read to her at high speed, together with a recantation, which she signed without fully realising what it contained. After signing this her sentence was commuted to one of lifelong imprisonment on a diet of dry bread and water. The question now arises whether her weakening in the face of the stake casts a shadow over the complete picture of Joan. Her terror does at least bring the Saint nearer to human standards. It shows that even she did not stand above life but within it; and one cannot help thinking of the Garden of Gethsemane, where a far Greater One said in His agony, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me."

But Joan had not yet reached the last Station of her Cross. Her recantation lay heavily on her conscience. Bitterly did she realise the inconstancy she had shown towards her mission. As soon as she had been led back to her cell, and had donned female attire once more, she felt herself betrayed. The cruel inner tragedy which must have been played out in her cell after this denial will never be known to the world. Then, three days later, the rumour spread through the town that Joan had "relapsed," for she had again put on man's clothing. When she was asked why she had done this she replied: "Because you did not keep your promises to me that I might go to Mass and receive the Host, and that you would take away the irons from my feet."<sup>60</sup> Joan had regained dominion over herself again, and about her recantation she declared "that as for the scrap of paper which contained her recantation she had not understood it at all."<sup>61</sup> God, too, had informed her, through His Heavenly Saints, how greatly He regretted her betrayal inasmuch as she had recanted in order to save her own life. Joan's fate was irrevocably sealed as a result of this declaration, and one week after her recantation she was found guilty by all the members of the court.

There was no mercy for a relapsed heretic, and the authorities hastened to carry out the sentence. On May 30th, 1431, at seven o'clock in the

morning, two priests visited her and told her that she was to die in the two hours later. When she learned this, Joan cried out in terror against the inevitable. She found it horrible that her pure, virgin body should be consumed by fire; and she gave vent to her despair in loud lamentation. She soon, however, found the strength to control herself, and asked to receive Communion, which, paradoxically enough, was then given to a person who had already been condemned as a heretic. Next she was dressed in a long black garment, and instead of a crown of thorns, a pointed paper hat was thrust on to her shaven head, bearing the inscription "Heretic, Backslider, Apostate, Idolater." She was then led, under a strict guard of English soldiers, to the place of execution, which was thronged with a huge crowd. A priest, abusing the Bible, then preached a sermon on the text that if "one member suffer, all the members suffer with it." At the sermon, they read out the sentence, in which it was stated that she had never seriously repented, but had returned to her sins like a dog to vomit, and therefore she had been cut off as a dead twig from the tree of the Church and given over to the civil authorities. Joan struggled, with her last strength which remained to her, to say a word of forgiveness to her enemies. And then she spoke out with a clear voice, thus winning her hardest fought victory of her life. She prayed for half an hour upon her knees, and tears streamed from her eyes; but not a sign of weakness marred the greatness of her bitter death. With melancholy eyes she looked down upon the town, and said, "Rouen, Rouen, O thou, my last dwelling place!" At the sight of her behaviour even her hostile judges were moved to tears. The English, however, forced the executioner to do his duty. Joan's last request was for a cross; and this an English soldier quickly contrived for her with two twigs. She kissed it, and hid it in her bosom. Then she climbed on to the stake and was bound to a post. The flames flared up, and with a last cry of "Jesus! Jesus!" her Golgotha came to an end. It was as much a part of her life as Good Friday is part of the life of Christ; and martyrdom set the Divine seal on her mission. Joan had paid for this with her life, and no man can do more. We can only say with the dramatist "O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive Thy Saints? How long, O Lord, how long?"<sup>62</sup>

## V

With Joan also, the body could be killed but not the soul. The executioner himself was a prey to remorse that same afternoon. And the English king's secretary said, after the execution of the heretic, "We are all lost, we have burnt a Saint." But it was the French people, above all, who could not reconcile their consciences to her death. France could not believe that it was thanks to a witch that it was still a free and independent nation. Twenty years after her death a rehabilitation trial was ordered by the French, and this led to a quashing of the original verdict. The stigma of being called a witch was removed from Joan. But even with this the Fre

people, in their need for expiating their guilt, were not satisfied. Pre-occupation over the Saint who had been condemned as a heretic grew greater and greater until a huge fabric had been built up on a myth which stretched over a period of several centuries. This myth was not ordained from above but elaborated, spontaneously, from deep down in men's souls, until it found a form which represented the faith of the French nation. No foreign concepts were brought into the case of Joan. The process of mythification is much more an attempt to grasp even more fully the significance of her mission. She had lain in an abasement from which no ordinary mortal could ever have risen again. And although this pre-occupation over her led, after some five hundred years, to her canonisation by the Church—in the heart of the people Joan had long before this lived as a Saint—even so, her figure remains shrouded in her eternal secret. The Maid embodies something unreal in her transcendental behaviour; and at the same time she is the personification of the truth which determines human destiny. A strange supernatural strength emanated from her; and it cannot be defined. This was why during the course of the centuries attempts had repeatedly been made to define Joan; for her appearance was bound up with the deepest beliefs of the Middle Ages, and went beyond her direct contact with God.

This process of creating a myth has no relation to the theory in which Joan is shown simply as a demon to whose help the powers of the underworld came, as she is portrayed in the "Shakespearian" play of *Henry VI*. Nor was Voltaire any nearer the mark in his parody of her, which has only produced a contemptible portrait. The modern version, too, which tries to understand Joan only as a "great figure" is unsatisfactory.<sup>63</sup> What is more, the last version seems, in the first instance, to be nearer to the truth than the stylised legend according to which Joan parried the enemy's blows, was unwounded, was able to wait for death, etc., etc.; but this latest, purely human interpretation of Joan is clearly inadequate as the latest writings clearly show. Modern research has helped in clearing up the factual material available, but a purely psychological interpretation leads at best to nothing more than an insoluble riddle, which produces no new interpretation. In Péguy's view the drama of the mysteries alone represents a powerful process of mythification, in which a Saint sacrifices herself for her people. Joan, with her creative strength, made the French people conscious of their new entity as a nation, and feeling the great distress of France so grievously she fought with all her strength for the national renovation of her country. This patriotic action grew, in her case, from a purely religious attitude, which permitted her to become the bearer of grace. This great warrior Saint of the Christian calendar represents a unique amalgamation of national and religious truths, which she fused into a synthesis through her expiatory femininity. So she became for France a national Saint, just as, in quite a different way, Brigit had done the same for Sweden. She is thus recognised by all parties as the symbol of French unity. It is impossible to put into words what it means for a people to possess such a symbol. As the fulfiller of the French idea of passion,

Joan went through the fire of purification; and by her way of sacrifice represents the true soul of France.

To understand this Saint as the religious incarnation of French genius really what is needed. In Joan's life the Angels play a very great part. The extraordinary side of her destiny began with the appearance of the Angel Michael. Angels cannot be overlooked in Joan's life. She lived their atmosphere, and she saw, as Jacob once did, the Angels ascending; descending the Heavenly ladder. She stood in a reverential attitude trust to them, and they allowed her to see things which remain hidden from other mortals. "They often visit mortals, but one does not see them. I myself have often seen them in the company of men."<sup>64</sup> Joan's conception of the Angels has nothing of the degeneracy of the later Middle Ages about it; to the Middle Ages Angels were sweet, plump-cheeked beings, of whom one told stories to children. For Joan, as for Dionysius Areopagita, the Angels were gigantic figures, filled with a holy power, and surpassed in their terrifying dimensions all human proportions—just as they are portrayed in Byzantine mosaics. The Maid of Lorraine observed the Angels as in the Bible: still the true messengers of God, who were not to men, and who fought against the infernal powers. This conception of the Angels—which has become lost to modernity, and which a few poets like Hölderlin and Rilke sought arduously to recapture—gave Joan a revelation, which is obviously not rational, and can only be approached through a symbolic way of thinking. According to the testimony of the inquisitors, "Joan had assumed her office from the Angels; for she averred that she had been sent in the name of God."<sup>65</sup> This accusation was raised against her many times during the course of the trial: "Quite openly I learn that she is a Messenger of God, and therefore more Angel than woman."<sup>66</sup> This hieratic qualification reveals her inner countenance. Joan really did speed like a winged Angel through France. She had not the nature of the Angels, but she served them. She herself gave this explanation when she told the story of the Angel who handed a crown to the King of France; and she concluded her allegory with the words, "I was an Angel!"<sup>67</sup> And in this utterance Joan revealed her deepest secret; for that function lies the religious significance of her mystery: she *was* Angel of France.

Nicholas Von Flüe

(1417—1487)

I

NOT A single citizen of the Swiss Confederacy, sneered the Swabian writer, Heinrich Morgenstern, in Berne in the year 1471, was a "holy and a blessed man"; and in doing so he grievously maligned Brother Claus. The statement must certainly have sounded offensive to Swiss ears. The enfuriated Bernese promptly retaliated by casting the foreigner into prison, and subsequently outlawed him from the territory of the Confederacy. There was, however, just a grain of truth in the Swabian's rash announcement. It was a fact that since the conclusion of the union the Confederacy had not produced a single Saint.<sup>1</sup> Gottfried Keller's description of Switzerland as a soil unsuited to artistic endeavour may well, with even greater aptitude, be applied to the domain of Saints. Compared with the Latin countries, the Confederacy does not present circumstances propitious to holy men. Obviously the Swiss temperament, with its dry, dispassionate quality, is too unfavourable to the high tension of religious exaltation, to be able to give rise to a Saint.

And yet the Swabian writer's malicious scoffing does not hold water, particularly with regard to the very man whom he sought to damage with his contumely. Nicholas von Flüe moves in a curiously remote, and yet ever present way through his own lifetime, and down through the centuries of the stormy events of Swiss history in its continual demand for freedom. He very soon acquired the fame of being a "living Saint," a reputation which no one is able seriously to dispute. To be sure, he is completely different from all other Swiss: Nicholas von Flüe is a unique phenomenon in the history of the Confederacy. He cannot be compared with Waldmann, Schinner, or even Zwingli. He is a man apart from all other men, and it would be impossible to establish any sort of a parallel between him and them. In spite of the difference of his nature, however, his cautiousness and his sturdy character reveal him as a truly Swiss figure, and he must be considered as a native to a degree scarcely applicable to any other son of Helvetia. With him it is the same as with Jeremias Gotthelf's great tales, which, owing to the power of their language and their profound rustic piety, are only fully intelligible to a Swiss, who from his childhood has been accustomed to their atmosphere. Similarly the life of Nicholas von Flüe, whence the Swiss character derives its religious quality, is free from all kind of sentimentality, as is most proper to this ancient democratic country. Through Nicholas the world of Saints pierces right into the Swiss

attitude towards life, and allows us to observe what a man's native land can mean to him in a Christian connection. Our hearts warm to this country Saint, with the smell of manure clinging to him, and his hands calloused by hard work. His close ties with the soil of his native-land acquire a religious quality, and for this reason the Swiss have always loved him as belonging to the very best which has arisen from their midst.

It is, of course, quite impossible for the Swiss to contain Nicholas von Flüe in the limits of his original nature. One of the best informed experts on him has found it necessary to complain that "devotional literature and art have alienated him from his very death from his race and soil, and gradually turned this blessed man into an almost prosaic, pious model for the whole world," a view which does not bear examination in the light of the facts.<sup>3</sup> Particularly did the painting, which is now in the choir at Sachseln—it bears the initials of the donor, Hans Ludwig Pfyffer of Altishofen—define the Swiss people's conception of Brother Claus. But the interpretation and execution of this painting, which dates from the middle of the seventeenth century, is that of the baroque period. The painting, too, by Deschwanden, was in part painted over, particularly the head, which now bears no resemblance whatever to the original picture. This, which has now become the usual Brother Claus type of picture, represents a mixture of the baroque and modern interpretations, and conveys nothing of his native origin or his visionary preoccupations. It is a much too uncountrified, not to say carefully tidy, portrait, from which we can grasp little of the real secret of this moving figure. We must rid ourselves of this popular notion of Brother Claus, if we seek to understand the real stature of the man of God.

Nicholas von Flüe is a phenomenon of the outgoing Middle Ages. As a late Gothic figure, his roots were firmly embedded in the religious culture of that period, the spiritual wealth of which Walter Muschg has attempted to evoke in his book, *Die Mystik in der Schweiz*. Brother Claus' mediaeval faith is to be discerned in the wooden statuette in the lower *Ranftkapelle* (1504), in the painting by Hans Fries (1517) and in the painting in the collection of the Archduke Ferdinand of Tirol (1578). The statue and the two paintings, however, give no indication of his real appearance, which, in accordance with the later mediaeval outlook, was passed over. These old impressions of him display a physiognomy of sinister savageness, which, by reason of its frightening reality, comes nearer to revealing his profound inner truth. They match the realistic and authentic picture of Nicholas to be found in Robert Durrer's monumental work on which any study of Brother Claus must inevitably be based. As a late Gothic man, Nicholas was more bitter and wilder, albeit more inaccessible and closer to God, than he is generally portrayed. The idea of a "repulsiveness" is one of which one could no longer "be proud"; it is a fear which springs from pure propaganda and contained not the least religious value. Moreover, in dealing with Brother Claus, modern man must first, in all loyalty, stress his curious strangeness, and not give the false impression of his being too friendly a figure—a sort of "rogue of God"; we must not make him "one

of us." The fissured, yearning, and brooding figure of the late Gothic Nicholas von Flüe brings about more forcibly than all attempts at modernisation—which unintentionally lead to the same result—a belittling of the Saint in modern eyes. Only if we set aside all prejudice and gaze into the disturbingly ascetic countenance of Brother Claus, and do not quail at his forbidding look, can we behold this strangely magnificent figure in the proper light. It is a figure which far surpasses, in its unique greatness, everything which marks the decline of the Church in the fifteenth century.

## II

Of the seven decades which were the span of life allotted to Nicholas von Flüe, he spent five like any other man. Considered from a purely superficial viewpoint his worldly life, which he first had to live, took up by far the greater part of his existence.

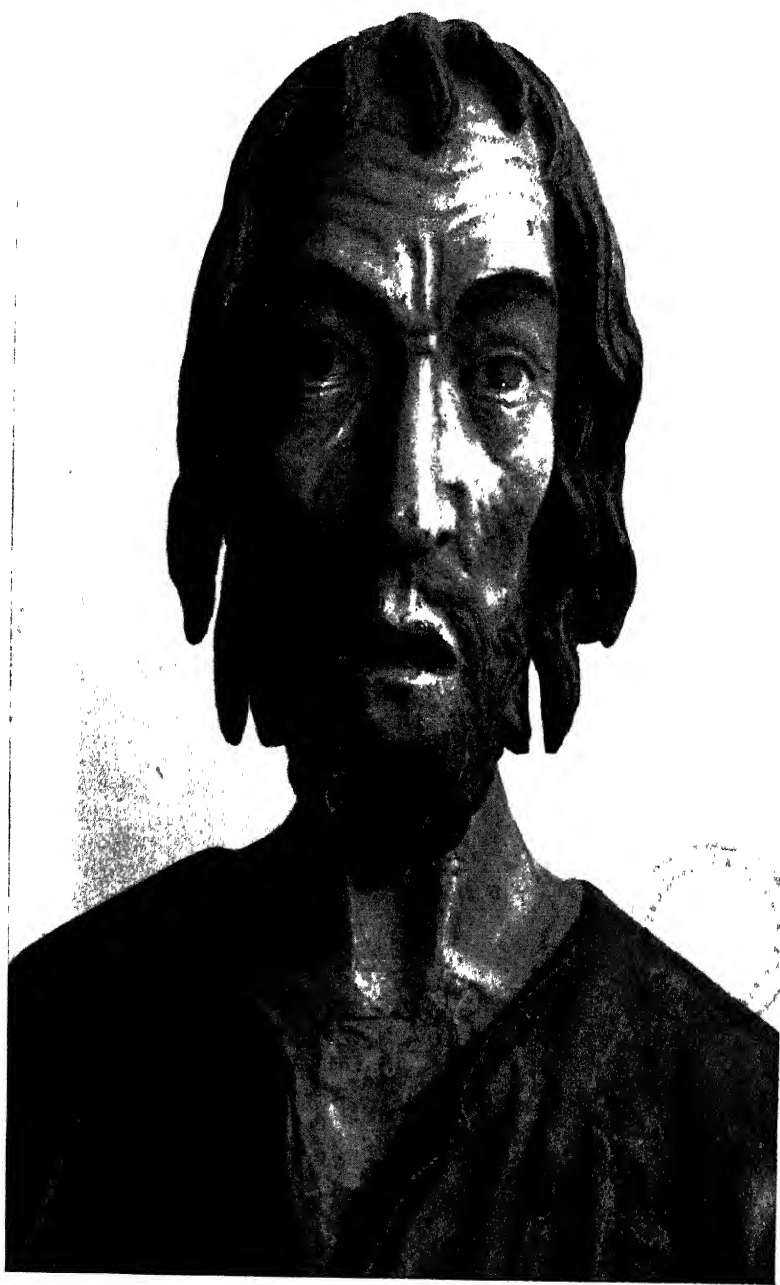
Nicholas grew up in a farmhouse in the heart of Switzerland. It was a pleasant countryside, beside the quiet waters of a lake, and surrounded by mountains which were not too oppressive. His parents were of "lowly stock" although they were in reasonable circumstances. Nicholas was simply brought up, even though by nature he was a real peasant. He enjoyed no sort of schooling, and, in all probability, remained illiterate to his dying day. From his earliest years he helped in the work on his father's small property. "During this period there was no task to which he had not stooped."<sup>3</sup> For many years of his life did Nicholas remain in this peasant world, which explains the slowness of his thoughts and acts, and his ponderous nature. As a peasant who milked the cows and wielded a pitchfork, he had both his feet firmly planted in life, and knew the joys and sorrows of the Earth from his own experience. We have to picture Nicholas in the best years of his manhood, dressed in his rough peasant's smock—the prototype of the bearded peasantry to be encountered in the heart of Switzerland to-day. The commonplaces of rural life were the predominant note of those early years, in the course of which, like other mortals, he entered into matrimony by marrying a certain Dorothea Wiss, who is described as a pretty woman, with a "decent-looking face and smooth skin." It is certain that he did not take this step purely out of deference to his father's wish, but from a healthy desire for a married life. Nor was their marriage by any means a purely platonic affair, and Nicholas' natural sensuality is to be seen in the five sons and five daughters who were the result of his urge to found a family.

Side by side with his activities as a peasant Nicholas also showed himself active in deeds of war, in which pursuit the Confederacy was, at that time, deeply involved. When he was just past his twentieth year, it is probable that he took part in the civil war which had broken out between Zürich and Schwyz. Later on he is to be found on several occasions on the field of battle. He even attained the rank, first of ensign, and then of captain, in which capacity he participated in the Swiss expedition into Thurgau. It is strange to have to visualise the Saint as the captain of a company of

yet the evidence of his military service leaves no room for doubt. He was not, however, the sort of man who is always spoiling for a fight as so many of the Confederates were in those days. There is no record of his having performed any exceptional feats of war. Probably his enthusiasm for a soldier's life was not great. He joined the armed forces for reasons of conscience, not, like a mercenary, just for the fun of it. For, as we may read as far back as Wölflin's biography of him, "Nicholas never went to war when it was not officially commanded. He was the greatest friend of peace; yet when it was important to fight for his country, he would not allow the enemy, by reason of his inactivity, to strut and swagger insolently about. But as soon as the enemy's might was destroyed and vanquished he would urge that they be treated with clemency."<sup>4</sup> He was not only opposed to unbridled, vandalistic warfare, but always advocated a gentle treatment of the conquered enemy.

Nicholas, owing to his official activities, was not unknown to the political world. He was elected not only to the Council, but also as a member of the local court. There is no more evidence, however, of his rigorous years of public life. But it is reported that, on behalf of his fellow-citizens, he sued the parish priest in connection with the payment of tithes. Unfortunately this does not fit in harmoniously with the spiritual picture of Nicholas which is to-day considered to be correct. The statement by the preaching friar that Nicholas had said, "whenever I saw a priest, it seemed as if I had beheld an Angel of God," accords ill with the picture of Nicholas suing his own parish priest at the age of forty. Nicholas was no canting hypocrite who had gone about from his childhood with his head cocked to one side. Moreover he helped to deprive the Monastery of Engelberg of its authority, occupied the Pastorate of Stans without consulting the parishioners, and in this affair, did not shrink from what was a manifest interference of civil authority in a church matter, since it seemed to him to be the proper course of action. Nicholas was, in fact, "powerful at court and in the Council, and in the administrative affairs of this my country," to which he added the observation that, "yet I do not remember ever having taken anyone's part, and, in so doing, deviated from the path of justice."<sup>5</sup> It is just this very sense of justice which caused this great son of Obwalden to suffer so many bitter disappointments. For not all judges shared with this same love of justice, but were led away by gifts, and allowed themselves to speak against their better judgment. When Nicholas became aware of all the injustices being perpetrated around him he was sickened by officialdom, and would co-operate no more. He not only declined the highest official position, that of high bailiff, but suddenly resigned from both his Council and court duties.

The story of Nicholas' activities in the world has often been told in great detail. Dichterhand has given an artistic account of it, which cannot be excelled. Yet it seems more appropriate to give only a succinct outline of Nicholas' worldly career. Although for Nicholas these years were in no way wasted, for they were rich in varied experiences, and were of great use to him later on, and although it would not be in order to belittle them, an



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intentionally brief survey of the first five decades of his life is justifiable for another reason.

On the subject of Nicholas' worldly years only a few meagre sources are available. History can adduce only one or two reliable pieces of information for the twenty years of his official life. Even the official lists of the Councillors of the canton of Obwalden are missing for precisely that period when Nicholas was an official. Even the fact that he was a deputy to the National Assembly cannot be authenticated by any historical document. Wherever one turns one finds hiatuses which have to be bridged by theoretical reconstructions. Unless we are simply to abandon ourselves to the efflorescences of historical phantasy, it is essential to view these years with restraint.

During this period Nicholas lived no differently from other men. As his first biographers had already noted, his life, whether as a peasant, a soldier or a civic official, was distinguished by its typical candour and straightforwardness. And there is no reason whatever to question this.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore he shared this honesty with many of his unknown contemporaries. Nicholas was not the only man in the fifteenth century who loved truth. Nor was he in any way exceptional in his worldly career. On account of his rather rigidly distinguished official activities people to-day have very little more to say about him. From the religious standpoint these decades of his life are seen to be a period of preparation, so that there is no point in dwelling on them at too great a length. In this upright life of his Nicholas still had to undergo a great transformation before he could become that towering figure whose symbolism remains throughout the centuries.

There is a significance to be attached to his worldly years (which should by no means be underrated), and this is to be found in the strong ties which linked him to the people and the soil. This great man of Obwalden was a man of the people, and rose up out of their midst; and his purely popular origin coloured all his utterances. Not less tenaciously did he cling to the clod which he had laboriously unearthed with the sweat of his brow. In his middle years Nicholas was essentially a man of the soil, with nothing undecided about him. His nature was grave and deliberate; grown out of the soil, and dependent on the powers of Heaven, this man, so sparing of his words, had nothing luminous about him. He was of a rustic primitiveness, the traces of which are still plainly manifest. The natural dominated the spiritual in these first decades, but they did not permeate his being so completely that both physical and Divine love were able to dwell together in Nicholas in perfect harmony, and be fused into a joyous unity. For they were never both in Nicholas at the same time, dwelling, as it were, side by side; the one clearly succeeded the other. This seems evident from the sources. His close ties, however, with the people of Obwalden and with his native soil, should not be set aside as of purely secondary importance. They are important not merely for their value as local colour and for providing a picture of those distant times. Rather do they point the way to the roots of the Saint, which spread far, far down into the soil. And from these there grew those solid foundations which do not crumble down with

every gust of wind. Nicholas was an existence grown out of the fostering soil of the people. This is of the utmost importance, since from it flowed his native strength, a strength which cannot be attributed to any other source. To be sure Nicholas did not remain bound up with the soil as most peasants do. It was the very problem of his life which arose precisely from this connection with the people and the land; and by means of it he climbed the heights of a timeless greatness.

### III

Like many countryfolk Nicholas was religiously inclined from his earliest youth. Whether this quality was inherited from his mother, as has been conjectured, cannot be established with any certainty. His piety had a dark tinge which served to strengthen his tendency towards depression. The figure of Nicholas has a distinctly melancholy trait. In the biographies of him, curiously little is said about this dejectedness. However, the serious character of his religiousness is clearly borne out by contemporary witnesses, and must be taken into account since it was a decisive feature of his development. Nicholas was the startled man of the Gothic Age, who only through trouble could attain peace.

The pathological component in his nature manifested itself in the first place in his addiction to solitude. His own son had admitted that "as far as he could recollect, his father had always avoided people and that his nature was that of a recluse, and that he had at all times sought after this."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, other entries in the *Church Register of Sachseln* emphasise his "withdrawn nature," and relate how, when he returned home from work, "he at once went off alone behind a cottage or else to some other secluded place."<sup>8</sup> This remarkable predilection for seclusion increased with the years instead of leaving him. It assumed an even more vigorous form, and his singularly retiring nature, as this tendency is popularly termed, induced him to seek the solace of religion. He sought assistance for his oppressive feelings in prayer. His son mentions again, in another place, how his father "would retire in the evening with everyone else; but when he woke in the night he would always hear that his father had got up again and was praying by the fire in the parlour."<sup>9</sup> This nightly praying is not the usual practice of the average Christian peasant, and in the case of Nicholas can only be explained by his fits of depression.

The grievous melancholy which weighed down on him was conspicuous too in the struggles with the Devil, which he had to go through. In most of the biographies of Nicholas these are passed over in dignified silence, probably to avoid giving offence to enlightened contemporaries. In point of fact, however, they took up so much of Nicholas' life that we cannot, in all seriousness, overlook the reports. His neighbour told of Nicholas, "how every day the Devil did do him grievous harm";<sup>10</sup> and his friend, too, wrote: "The Devil has inflicted great hardship on him, and especially once, when he was seeking to cut down thorns in the Bergmatt; and the Devil did hurl him into a dense thicket in such wise that he did faint, and

received much hurt; and this was truly seen upon his body."<sup>11</sup> To these hand-to-hand fights with the Devil his son also testified in a detailed account of a similar episode.<sup>12</sup> And later, too, when Nicholas was already in the *Ranft*, he was acquainted with the Evil Enemy who tormented him and struck him, as Anthony of Egypt had suffered once in the desert.<sup>13</sup> If we are to understand Nicholas' inner development, then, we must not push all these reports aside as murky superstition. They are extremely enlightening for the purpose of examining the state of a sorely oppressed soul. Nicholas had to deal with the Devil objectively and not just "spiritually"; and the Devil, moreover, played a great part in the belief of men in the latter half of the Middle Ages. It is precisely the material aspect of these sinister fights with the Devil which must be underlined, for there is not the slightest reason to keep silent about them as though they were something shameful: they are yet another proof of the unbroken strength of his religious life.

These oppressive experiences were associated with visions, which haunted the reflective, level-headed peasant. And, like the Prophet Amos, they came upon him in the midst of the commonplace tasks of the daily round. They would suddenly be with him when he was setting out to mow. He heard a voice telling him, from a cloud in the Heavens, that he "was a foolish man, and should surrender to the will of God," as his son, Walter, reports.<sup>14</sup> He openly struggled against the Divine will with all the heaviness of his soul. The Visions thereupon urged him anew and left him no peace. "And on another occasion, as he was walking across the meadow to inspect the cattle, he sat down upon the ground; and he began, after his own manner, to pray from the inmost depths of his heart, and he gave himself up to Heavenly meditations; and suddenly he saw, growing out of his mouth, a white lily; and it had a wondrous fragrance, and it grew ever upwards until it touched the roof of Heaven. And soon thereafter the cattle (by means of which he did maintain his whole family) came over to him; and for a while he lowered his gaze, and his eye rested upon a horse, which was more beautiful than were the others. And he saw how the lily which grew from out his mouth bowed low before that horse, and how it was devoured by the animal as it passed him."<sup>15</sup> In this vision he saw his own destiny as though he were gazing into a mirror, so that he could be in no doubt regarding its meaning. It showed him, with frightening clarity, the grave danger which menaced him: that of failing to seize the riches of Heaven. This experience must have substantially added to his inner excitement.

All these occurrences merely served to increase the depression which was weighing down Nicholas' life, and did not leave him any more joyful about his existence. He himself speaks of his "anxieties and hardships," by which he means his attacks of depression. These are no invented afterthoughts. By his own admission "God applied the purifying fire and the goading spur, that is a grave temptation, so that He would not suffer me to rest either by day or by night, but I was so utterly downcast that even my dear wife herself and the society of our children was a burden unto me."<sup>16</sup>

The aggravation of the spiritual crisis cannot be made any clearer than Nicholas himself has made it in this admission, which describes his sad weariness in such naked phrases. Of this same feeling the biography observes: "He began to disdain domestic matters, upon which, until that time, he had lavished much care and attention."<sup>17</sup> In view of these different statements, it would scarcely be intelligent to contest his morbidness. The existence of a pathological tendency in him cannot be denied; it is to be found too in many other great Christians. Our attention should be directed not to belittling this melancholia but to noting what Nicholas made of it. While countless men in the same circumstances merely become a prey to self-mortification and laceration, the great son of Obwalden was able, in a gigantic struggle, to shape it to his own ends. All his pathological depressions he destroyed by fire in a great process of purification, from which a new life's work gradually arose, before which we can only stand in utter wonderment. The holiness which was wrested from the most grievous depression is the greatness of Nicholas, and a symbolic value is to be attached to it.

In the difficult task of bringing to flower his giftedness the great undertaking of his life opened out before Nicholas' spirit. He was able to find no connection with God, with his home, or family. Instead of being able to love things in God, they kept on slipping in annoyingly between him and God. He could not renounce things in the ideal sense of the word as advocated by mysticism—he had to run away from them. "Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple": these words of Jesus' are to some extent a commentary on the life of Nicholas. Even though it had not been summed up in this New Testament verse, the verse does nevertheless contain the vital problem of this Saint's life. It is the problem of "abandon everything" which so exercised him, and by means of which alone he believed he would be able to master his spiritual affliction. He considered it was his duty to cut the ties of home and family completely. Only at such a high price, it seemed to him, would he be able to win his Heavenly heritage. It was a frightful moment for Nicholas when his soul was faced with this grievous necessity in all the exigency of its character. The sacrifice must have been hard for him, incredibly hard, for, according to the old sources, he fought with this superhuman decision for more than two years.<sup>18</sup> There is thus nothing of undue haste about it, and indeed such was the cautious circumspection of Nicholas' ponderous temperament that the possibility of too precipitate a course of action was entirely precluded. It was a slow, very slow process of ripening. The severing of all the bonds that linked him to home and family was no idle whim of the settled peasant's, devised by himself: it was a summons from God, to which he was, in duty, bound to submit.

When Nicholas eventually formed his plan "to go out into a foreign land, and as a hermit of the woods to go from sanctuary to sanctuary,"<sup>19</sup> it was a quite unacceptable demand to his family. Even though they were in assured economic circumstances, we should not blame them for their opposition to his scheme. It was by no means easy for them having such an

eccentric person as the head of the house, and they were quite unable to understand him in the least. The family could not possibly see in his project, as Nicholas did and as posterity has done, a task ordained by God. To them this proposal was purely the product of his lonely way of life, and they were desperately anxious that he should give rise to no breath of family scandal. Both the elder sons, one of whom was projecting marriage, while the other was hoping to succeed to the principal public position, must have considered their father's move as extremely injurious to their careers, and they too opposed the very strongest resistance to him. Even later on the rancour of his relatives did not abate. The idea that the family discussions took place in an idyllic atmosphere of give and take, as some highly coloured versions love to relate, in the interests of Nicholas' devotional character, cannot be accepted. On the contrary, there must have been the most violent scenes. With all the respect due to paternal authority, the peasants' sons in those days were not likely to veil their opinions in gentle speech. First and foremost, however, did his wife grow pale at the thought, for she was about to give birth to their tenth child. With grim determination Dorothea spoke out against his fantastic plan to become a hermit dwelling in a wood, for she could only see it as a threat to their domestic happiness. Vehemently she fought to preserve her marriage, which she was unwilling to surrender lightly. It would have said little for the spiritual union of man and wife, if Dorothea had merely put up an indifferent opposition to his project. There was no inner compulsion urging her on, as was the case with Nicholas; she could only regard it as the destruction of their wedded love. And against this danger Dorothea fought with all the strength of a woman. Her attitude can at once be understood if we view the whole episode as she saw it. Even the sources admit a certain note of drama. In accordance with the teaching of the Church, Nicholas, of course, could not carry out his plan without the consent of his wife, and, reports Wölflin, "he took the greatest pains to prevail upon her, but for long it was in vain, owing to the many cares of the household . . . But as he continued to press her constantly, she at length, reluctantly and with many unavailing tears, gave her consent."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, how many tears and spiritual wounds underlie these dry, prosy words! We have to feel this bitter event to be able to understand its whole tragedy. Nicholas had wrested his wife's consent from her: she would not stand in the way of his spiritual peace, and she had, in the end, freely surrendered him, and he could now depart. He considered it a great mercy that he had finally won his wife's consent, and he was never again seized by a desire to go back to his wife and children. But for Dorothea the act of relinquishing him for ever was a grievous blow. The tremendous sacrifice of this simple peasant woman—of which few others would have been capable—deserves to be represented in all its greatness. Without her heroic self-denial the work of Nicholas' later life is inconceivable.

The parting hour, when Nicholas left his family, left an indelible impression on everyone concerned. We know, from a statement of his wife's to a visitor, that the inevitable befell on October 16th, 1467. None

of the old historians has written at any length on the parting scene, which tortured the hearts of those who remained behind with untold pain. A reverent awe draws a veil over the tearful sorrow of this bitter parting. It is one of the principal characteristics of the peasants of Central Switzerland to choke down even the most profound grief in silence. Only the figure of Nicholas himself must be illuminated: he had a long cowl of some coarse material, his head was uncovered and his feet bare; and since he was about to begin the life of a pilgrim, he held a staff in his hand. Like an eternal wanderer he tore himself away from his own, and went forth: forth from his family, forth from his native heath, forth from his home and out into the unknown. Like another Abraham, bound for the land which God would show him.

Nicholas' departure has at all times been the subject of much discussion. Even in his lifetime there appeared a detailed and scholarly enquiry, by Petrus Nurmagen, on the religious aspect of Nicholas' desertion of his wife and child.<sup>21</sup> And the argument about this point goes on to this very day. The admirers of Nicholas, who would allow no slur to remain on his character saw, in his departure from his kith and kin, no shirking of his duty to his family, since his wife had agreed to it. Nevertheless these well intentioned apologias merely display a neglect of the fateful aspect of his action, which is as great as that shown by the disparaging belittlement of Nicholas which came from the liberal quarter.<sup>22</sup> Both versions, each in a manner completely contrary to the other, evince the same inability to recognise a truly tragic situation, which, whatever our treatment, must be fittingly treated. From the ordinary middle-class point of view, in which the family represents the greatest good, the *summum bonum*, Nicholas' departure from home into homelessness must always have a somewhat scandalous flavour about it. His action can in nowise be commended for our imitation. It is a scandal which cannot be contested. The step from domesticity to homelessness is something which can only be understood from a radically different point of view. A remarkable act of conscience, which required implicit obedience to the call of God, is involved in this distressing separation from wife and home. The Divine Call alone grants to man the highest right: to break away from the normal conduct of his life, and to take the bold step into the unknown. With his pilgrim's life, Nicholas came near to the ideal of holiness, which burst out of a middle class form of life, and requires to be classed under a different heading. Nicholas began his hermit's life quite unpretentiously, without any theatrical artificiality. The simplicity of this move is of the most arresting greatness, and one which our imagination is quite able to comprehend: For fifty years I have served with my fellow-men, and lived through everything with them; the rest of my existence shall belong to the Eternal alone. This is undoubtedly a profoundly religious attitude in the face of which one can only be silent.

In order to carry out the sacrifice of his native land, Brother Claus, as he is known from now on, determined to go to a foreign land. This resolve is established by a statement of his wife's. He bent his steps, then, in the

direction of Alsace. Brother Claus had good reasons for the choice of this place. At that time Alsace was the centre of the Friends of God movement. Brother Claus must have heard of this some time earlier, probably through Matthias Hattinger, the Hermit, who dwelt at Wolfenschiessen, his mother's home town. Furthermore, even at Entlebuch, which was not at all far away, the Friends of God had their representatives; and it has been established that there was communication between Strasbourg and the Monastery of Engelberg. Nor is it a coincidence that the first people who later visited Brother Claus came from Alsace. And even though the "Friend of God in the Oberland" may be a figure of Rulman Merswin's imagination, the Friends of God certainly did exist, and from them arose a living reality which towers over the decadence into which the religious way of life had fallen in the fifteenth century. Since the Reform Council had shown itself powerless to combat the immorality of the clergy, the faithful, in view of the distressing state of the Church, were obliged to seek out their own way. The most vigorous of them felt themselves attracted to the Friends of God movement, which appeared like an oasis in the desert. For the most part the Friends of God were laymen who were opposed to dogma, and who were mistrustful, too, of the depravity of the Church. Owing to their individual piety they had not quite rid themselves of priestly guidance, and found themselves induced to form with prudent restraint and discernment a party of their own. For this reason certain Friends of God came into conflict with the Inquisition. Thus, by chance, Brother Claus was linked to this Friends of God movement, which was suspected of heresy, and was critically influenced by it in the plans he had devised to withdraw into solitude. Throughout his pilgrim's wandering through Alsace the ideal of being a friend of God hung ever before his eyes. In the end, moreover, he attained his goal in such a symbolic way, that he becomes the summit of this mystical, lay movement. In the most wonderful way, Brother Claus embodies the mystic doctrine of the thirteenth century in his life by his friendship of God, and reaches the most profoundly religious way of life that a man can reach. Through him the ideal of a friendship with God acquires a timeless symbolism, since, although it overcomes the relationship of bondage between God and man it does not infringe the unique filial concept of Jesus. Friendship with God is crammed with an abundance of inexplicable possibilities which should not be held suspect just because of irrelevant doubts. That the lay Friend of God must not slip into heresy is shown precisely by Brother Claus, to whom the old sources so repeatedly, and so rightly grant this noble title.<sup>23</sup>

As Brother Claus made for Alsace there was nevertheless an unexpected obstacle in store for him. Before the little township of Liestal he had an experience about which the old historians, unfortunately, provide few details. It appears that he fell into conversation with a peasant, and eventually explained his project to him. Whereat the peasant replied somewhat rudely "that he should go home to his family again, and serve God there. This would be more acceptable to God than his becoming a burden to other, strange peoples."<sup>24</sup> The peasant also pointed out to him that the

Confederates were hated by other nations on account of their love for fighting. Despite the fellow's blustering tone Brother Claus was taken aback and came to a halt on his pilgrim's way. As it was evening he lay down under a hedge. It was to be the decisive night of his life. It was important because he had another vision in which the little town of Liestal appeared before him all red, as though it were burning. "A ray of light from Heaven," states Wölflin, who divines more than he understands of the event, "shone around the man; whereby he felt a hurt, not otherwise than if he had been slashed with a knife, and, as though pulled by a rope, did he feel urged to return home again."<sup>25</sup> From these somewhat clumsy phrases we may conclude that it was an agonising birth which Brother Claus went through that night, and that it was as another man that he crawled out from under the hedge in the early morning. This terrifying experience before Liestal cannot be overestimated, and its consequences have been all too little appreciated. Nicholas himself explained it as a sign from Heaven, warning him not to go into another country. His love for his native land triumphed over his yearning for his spiritual kindred in the far distance. It is not exaggerating to say that the national Saint was born under the hedge near Liestal. There and nowhere else was the great event determined. Without this experience Brother Claus would have been lost to Switzerland, and there would have been no great work of atonement at Stans. The problem with which Brother Claus struggled fiercely was his homeland. He felt driven to abandon it, and yet he could not, in his heart, carry out the act of separation. Nicholas was going to be a Saint, and yet he was impeded in this by his own Swiss land. Only one course remained to him, to weld the two together, and become the national Saint of Switzerland.

After the long sought-after illumination which came to him at Liestal, the Gothic restlessness left him. His depression, too, he was able to discard like a worn-out garment. Obedient to the vision which had changed the direction of his pilgrim's path from foreign parts back into his own country, he hesitated no longer about returning. Brother Claus was not one of those who put their hands to the plough and then look back. At the bidding of Heaven he returned by the way he had come, caring nothing for the derision which awaited him in Obwalden. Without greeting his family he betook himself into one of the nearby Alpine valleys. The imminence of winter which was piling up her masses of snow obliged him to abandon the Klüsteralp and go towards the valley. He selected the Ranfttobel as his halting-place, and it was to be associated with his name for ever after.

#### IV

"The indulgent reader has perhaps followed me more or less willingly as far as the Ranft. Will he also dare to descend into the Ranft with me?"<sup>26</sup> With these words Heinrich Federer concludes his—unfortunately—unfinished monograph on Nicholas von Flüe. His last sentence clearly betrays the feeling that a new epoch now begins in the life of Brother

Claus, an epoch which has only a very little in common with his earlier existence. Greatness, in Brother Claus' life, only begins at the moment when he plunged down into the wild mountain gorge. What was it that went on down there in the Ranfttobel, hemmed round with firs? It can hardly be described in words. Anyone who wishes to have an idea of it must be willing to come down with us into the Tobel, and this is something which demands a spiritual inversion. A horizontal consideration of the event merely glances, as it were, off the surface; it has to be viewed vertically, for only in this way can it be properly seen. With only the bare news of the historical witnesses it is not possible to understand the life that was lived in the Ranft. Rather must we go down into the gorge with Brother Claus himself, deeper and deeper down, until we have reached the very bottom. This inwardly shared journey really is a perilous adventure, and it is indeed appropriate to say to the reader, with the poet, "Are you willing to do it?" If only the reader can maintain the impetus of a movement which will lead him along a new path. . . .

From now on Brother Claus lived in a little log cabin, and later in a chapel, with a small cell built on, "which the valley men put up for him, being at variance with his relatives." Oddly enough his hermitage was barely quarter-of-an-hour's distance away from his former home. In spite of this proximity, Brother Claus, like some new Elijah, dwelt there as a hermit. The similarity to Anthony of Egypt, the founder of the anchorites, even struck the oldest of the biographers, Gundelfingen. Brother Claus does in fact belong to the line of great hermits who appear throughout the history of the Christian Church, and who only to modern lack of intelligence could appear to be merely idle eccentrics. Their roots go very much deeper down. The hermit of Obwalden must be classified in this anchorite tradition. It always surprises people that Nicholas, after leaving his family, did not enter a monastery. Possibly the depravity which distinguished the monastery life of that time prevented him from pursuing a monastic course. Brother Claus wanted to be a hermit, or, as his relatives put it, a *Waldbruder*. It was solitude that he sought in the still, silent Ranfttobel with its solemn tranquillity; and this is a matter of exceptional importance. Not all solitude is to be judged in the same manner. The solitude, or isolation, from world weariness, is to be considered as an indisposition in man; and that other one, which is really a perfidious desertion, in which man bemoans his helplessness—these have as little connection with the solitude sought out by Brother Claus, as that postulated with regard to the rebellion of the masses as a "seventh solitude." From all these various solitudes which ultimately arise from an inability to enjoy genuine companionship, the hermit's solitude of Brother Claus differs fundamentally. Nicholas never felt his anchoritism as an oppression on his spirit. For him the awe-inspiring silence which always surrounded him was a great gift. Brother Claus was alone in the Ranfttobel, but alone with God, and that is something basically different. Only this religious solitude, which flows out from a blissful friendship with God, can man endure without harming his internal life.

Nevertheless, Brother Claus' solitude in God must not be depicted as idyllic. He did not live like "*Hieronymus im Gehäuse*," whom Dürer portrayed as so beneficent. A glance at his humble, lowly hermitage puts us on our guard against such a notion. A tall man could not stand upright in it. It was an empty space in which there was neither table, bed, nor any cooking utensil. When he slept he either lay down on the floor, or else leant in a half-standing position with his back against the wall. And yet this cell, which is still preserved to-day, is historically, perhaps, the most impressive place to be seen in Switzerland, if we bear in mind what this hermit, with no wants at all, must have endured through the dark nights and long months of winter in the space of these four walls. A religious awe floods through us as we gaze long at this room of martyrdom. In this small, dark cell one involuntarily has the rare consciousness of standing on holy ground. Many a time would Brother Claus abandon his cell, and go out into the "wild forest." On Sunday he would go to Mass at Sachseln—while he had no chaplain of his own—and every year he would go, incognito, on three pilgrimages. He led a rigorously holy life in his mountain gorge. He devoted many hours every day to prayer, without ever growing tired. Brother Claus was a great prayer, who toiled to penetrate ever further into God. The famous symbolic vision of the Three in One, whereof the "riddle even to-day has not yet been completely solved,"<sup>27</sup> served him in his meditations. Speculative explanations of this which have been advanced are, of course, of purely hypothetical value. That the picture of the vision of the Trinity was "not only the fruit of his spiritual contemplation and his artistic imagination" but also goes back to other matters has been proved by Father Alban Stöckli.<sup>28</sup> The significant feature of Brother Claus' visionary meditations is the fact that he was also a mystic, and this side of him should not be overlooked.<sup>29</sup> Without his submersion in mysticism he would never have been able to maintain his life of solitude. His constant intercourse with God is the source of all his wisdom. And thanks to this he was able to overcome all the Devil's temptations which exercised him even in the Ranft until he had won spiritual clarity. When we think of Brother Claus' constant intercourse with God, we can guess something of what was going on in his soul, although he took the ultimate secret of his mystical experience with him to the grave. We must not seek to unravel the mystery of what he himself denied to other eyes.

To the mystical atmosphere, too, belongs that curious lack of food which from the first has been noted in regard to Brother Claus. When he settled down in the Ranft he would eat "shrivelled up pears and beans, herbs and roots, together with water from the stream which flowed hard by."<sup>30</sup> Moreover, since he sought to be rid of worldly needs, he tried to make his diet more and more frugal. In this respect he was helped by the fact that even before then he had been a great faster. During his worldly life "he fasted for a long time every Friday, and then four days out of every week, and finally the whole time, so that every day he ate no more than a crust of bread or some dried pears."<sup>31</sup> And now, in the Ranft, he extended his renunciation of food very much further. His fasting assumed unusual

forms, and soon surpassed all normal notions. The fame of his complete starvation sprang up, was swiftly bruited abroad, and became the great sensation of his age.

As is usually the case in similar circumstances some people were filled with amazement and exultation, while others were suspicious, and muttered things about trickery. On the one hand the fifteenth century was a confusion of superstitions, and yet at the same time it was a prey to scepticism, and therefore unable to take everything on trust. The political authorities had a watch kept on the hermit since they too were interested in the clearing up of this question. "By order of the Council, watchmen were appointed to keep a careful watch on the whole of the Ranft gorge, so that no man could go either to or from the servant of God. Even after this watch had been maintained a whole month long with the utmost vigilance, they found no evidence at all of religious sham which had been rumoured out of a desire to tell bragging tales."<sup>32</sup> The spiritual authorities too were filled with the same suspicion, and the representative of the Bishop of Constance put Brother Claus himself to the test by asking him what was most deserving of merit in Christianity. And when Brother Claus answered, "Holy obedience," the Bishop's representative commanded him, by virtue of obedience, to eat three pieces of bread, which ill became the fasting Brother.<sup>33</sup> A priest asked him: "Are you not afraid that you may go astray, or fail?" And Brother Claus answered, "As long as I have humility and faith I cannot fail."<sup>34</sup> The simple earnestness of the Friend of God triumphed over all suspicions; there was absolutely no fraud which could be proved against him. His amazed contemporaries bowed before the miracle of Brother Claus' starvation. And of their belief in it the sources provide a wealth of evidence. Later on there was not any doubt entertained even in Reformist circles. Bullinger, Myocnius, Vadian, and Flacius, all mention the hermit, "who for more than twenty years, as is irrefutably established, lived without any kind of food."<sup>35</sup>

Common sense, of course, militates vigorously against this assumption, which it regards as a sheer impossibility. One would more readily chew those same roots which Brother Claus, as Stumpf's *Chronicle* asserted a generation later, is said to have eaten, than believe in a complete absence of food.<sup>36</sup> But has this so-called "common sense" ever acknowledged a miracle? It has always been eager to attribute wonderful events to natural causes, and even then there were pure rationalists, who pointed to the fat air which the hermit inhaled! In the end, moreover, such an attitude becomes laughable, since, by reason of its own smallness, it will not admit greatness. The idea that Brother Claus' lack of nourishment can of course not be factually correct is a material worldly outlook, and overlooks the authentic sources. Nor is there scarcely any need to conceive of anything on the basis of this pedantic pseudo-knowledge. Even though there are many false reports of miracles, a blunt rational approach, with its consequent disavowal, does not make the problem any easier. We must realise that the prestige of Brother Claus in his own time rests on the miracle of his fasting. He is the hermit, "who is deemed holy since he eats nothing," as

Bernardino Imperiali reported to the Duke of Milan.<sup>37</sup> Had it not been for this prestige, which was the result of his miraculous fasting, probably the pitch of confidence would never have been reached, whereby his contemporaries were able to compromise over their political feuds. This is a reality which necessarily presupposes the miraculous event. That Brother Claus himself spoke little about this miracle, and would answer inquisitive questioners with the reply, "God knows,"<sup>38</sup> is beside the point. Nor does his retort to Abbot Georg von St. Stephan, "My good Father, I have never said, nor do I say now, that I do not eat," in any way imply that he did take nourishment.<sup>39</sup> With this answer Brother Claus was not at all guilty of that ambiguity which many writers about the hermit mention with regard to this question. Rather did he have to answer in this way if he was unwilling to disclose the secret, which concerned only himself. The world of Saints proves in the most impressive manner that the miracles of the human soul are to be understood as much greater than the materialistic thinking of to-day.

Instead of arguing about the possibility or impossibility of such an event, it would be more suitable to meditate on the meaning of this miraculous fasting. This is the first task to be done, and not the initiation of a series of conjectures, which could not possibly be any more decisive to-day than they were then. In this connection, the statement of his father confessor, Oswald Yssner, leads us along the right path. Brother Claus once told him, "in the greatest confidence, that when he was at Mass and the priest was celebrating the Sacrament, he received a great strengthening therefrom in his ability to go without food or drink, but that without this he could not have endured to do so."<sup>40</sup> This allusion brings Brother Claus' lack of nourishment into the realms of mystic experience, in which sense only can it be understood. The Sacramental eating set this chosen man of God free from normal eating. An act of mercy from Heaven and not a mere feat of strength was taking place in the depths of the Ranftobel. These religious meditations in a state of miraculous fasting must be viewed first and foremost as a sign directed against the voracious appetites of a decadent world. In the days when Brother Claus lived uncontrolled gluttony was practised, and at meals men filled their bellies so full that they were more like animals at fodder-time. As against this unbridled greed, the miraculous abstinence of the hermit illustrated most vividly the Bible saying, "Man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord." Any meditation on the strange significance of Brother Claus' fasting in the Ranft must necessarily follow along these lines, if it is not to be written off as simply miraculous. All other reflections lead us into a field which is quite fruitless from the religious point of view.

As was to be expected, Brother Claus' miraculous fasting has given rise to various vexatious consequences. The further men are removed inwardly from such an experience the more do they seek to probe into the personal secret of the Friend of God. In particular was he viewed with suspicion by the theologians. At all times there have been among theologians certain

advocates of God, as it were, who reserve the right to determine what may and what may not be included in the great household of God. And they wanted to know if there were not fiendish powers at work in this man, and considered it necessary to examine him more closely. It is recorded how theologians set "various knotty problems about the Holy Scriptures" before him, merely to entangle him in a trap.<sup>41</sup> The climax of the theologians' persecution is to be seen in the call for help reported to have been sent out by the government of Obwalden to the government of Lucerne asking for assistance in protecting Brother Claus from these vexations. In high alarm the national records for the year 1482 state, "that of late a strange priest has been with him, and examined him strictly concerning the Holy Trinity, the Holy Christian Faith, and other Christian matters, seeking to find fault with him; and he, as we do understand, has been found in this same examination, to be no other than sturdy, righteous, and perfect. But because he has not been able to overcome him in this, the stranger has threatened him, and said that he will set yet another man against him, and send him to examine and to probe him more thoroughly."<sup>42</sup> The request of the authorities of Obwalden was to the effect that the government of Lucerne should not permit such theologians to pass through their territory, for "that by suchlike strange rogues might some roughness be put upon good Brother Claus, whereof we should be greatly disquieted."<sup>43</sup> According to Eduard Herzog's careful interpretation of this letter, we are to regard these menacing theologians, who might have put some roughness on Brother Claus, as inquisitors.<sup>44</sup> In the light of this possibility one understands the fears of the Obwalden government, for the Inquisition was still the dreaded scourge of Christendom, which brought indescribable suffering in its train, and from whose dungeons men did not easily come out again. This official record is a serious document, and clearly illuminates the danger which, from time to time, hung over Brother Claus. Obviously the hermit was not regarded in the same light by all the theologians during his lifetime in the Ranft as is the case to-day, when the body of the Saint has been set up to lie in state in a silver mask and a glass coffin before the altar. What is certain, however, is that the inquisitorial suspicion was unjustified. Although Brother Claus in all his years in the Ranft had no dealings at all with the parish priest of Sachseln, this is to be attributed rather to the loose morality of the clergy at that time, and to his own independent nature. The Friend of God is never to be found in real opposition to the Church, which he always regarded with the greatest veneration. He greatly esteemed serious churchmen, and this is attested by his long friendship with Pastor Heino, and with his most enlightened Father Confessor, Oswald Yssner, both of whom stimulated him greatly.

Occasional insinuations were unable to tarnish the fair repute of Brother Claus, who continued to prevail by reason of his miraculous fasting. Recognition of the significance of Brother Claus is not a present-day discovery, nor is it in any way exaggerated. The greatness of this man was realised in his own lifetime, and even in those days spread far beyond the frontiers of his native land. Usually this is not nearly enough appreciated,

or else it is intended to restrict it to the purely patriotic angle. In the year 1473 this incredibly miraculous fasting was discussed at the fair at Halle in Saxony,<sup>45</sup> and in 1486 Trithemius was able to say: "I do not think there is any man alive in Germany who has not heard of this wonder."<sup>46</sup> In Austria, too, and in Italy, people were engrossed by him. The sign had at least the effect of making men aware of it. We should not, however, place the greatest emphasis on the miraculous fasting. This attitude is understandable, in view of men's attraction to marvels of all sorts, but is far removed from the mind of Brother Claus. He himself paid no attention whatsoever to it, and he should not be portrayed from this angle. For the sign then takes the place of the thing, and the indication becomes illusory.

The inmost essence of Brother Claus is best expressed in the term *Staretz*. This may appear to be a rather far-fetched interpretation; but what lies hidden behind this foreign word is much more closely connected with the hermit of the Ranft than the use of such a word would suggest. The word *staretz* is used in the Eastern Church to signify *Patriarch*, or *aged man*. The Staretz usually belonged to a community of monks, but occupied a most exceptional position in the monastery. In his condition of being imbued with spirituality he had no administrative duties to perform, and indeed his charismatic activity went far beyond such duties, even though he had often never been a priest. His gifts of grace are not gifts to be perceived in an external, visible, official position. His nomination to the post of Staretz invariably came spontaneously from the midst of the people, often in opposition to the Bishop. He was no ordinary monk, but strove with his ideal of holiness to embody once more the great figures of the early Christian age. These Christlike sages were wonderful men, endowed with a rare greatness of soul and an exalted serenity. One saw that there was a steadfast firmness in their lives, and that they were filled with an inner beauty. The Staretz was at one with God, and therefore full of a loving sympathy towards men, whom he would help to set free from all their shortcomings. The principal thing with the Staretz was not the curing of bodily hurts, although he never ceased from doing so. Rather did he guide the inexperienced souls of men into a religious way of life. Often, too, he possessed the gift of prophecy; he would teach men to distinguish between the important and the unimportant, and show them both the limitations and the magnificence of human life. The basic assumption of this spiritual caring for people was that they could go to him in complete candour and frankness, although he could only give them his counsel and not absolution. He could, as it were, get into the soul of the tortured man, and raise it up to the level of his own. By means of their faith the Staretzes were able to find the inner meaning of the most complicated of matters. Since they judged all life's entangled problems from the exalted standpoint of their nearness to God, they were possessed of an extraordinary ability to minister to the needs of the spirit, an ability which comes only from a fundamental knowledge of the darkness of the human soul.

The essential nature of the Staretz, as briefly outlined here, is needed in order to perceive at once how Brother Claus also performed the same

functions. There can scarcely be a term more suitable to the hermit of the Ranfttobel than this definition. Brother Claus is the Swiss Staretz, who, knowing the secret of God, ministered to the soul of his people. He was certainly considered as just such a figure in his time, even though the word was not at his contemporaries' disposal. They felt it instinctively, however, and for this reason many visited the Friend of God in the Ranft, just as the Staretzes were visited in ancient Russia. Brother Claus had not proudly cut himself off from his people, nor was he separated from his native land. They were both enclosed within him, for without this spiritual union even the religious man dries up. What warmth springs from Brother Claus' greeting alone: "God give you a good and blessed morning, ye dear friends and ye dear people."<sup>47</sup> Men sensed this sincere love for the people, which was deeply rooted in God, and they were attracted by this emotion. Naturally many people went to see him out of sheer curiosity, but these "wonderers" were recognised by his sharp look, and were unmasked. With the passage of time it became no longer so easy to reach him. Later on he put himself at their disposal only at certain hours. Many people, however, went, and the concourse was "very great"; according to an early testimony, "more than a hundred thousand men."<sup>48</sup> From distant parts poured in on him, high and low, old and young, driven onward by a restless desire for penitence and for an illumination to be shed on their life's way, an illumination which only this man of God could give them.

It is true that they might involuntarily shrink back at the first moment, when the hermit of the Ranft greeted them. Yet there are also accounts which mention his "finely shaped, good-looking face."<sup>49</sup> But on most of his visitors the frighteningly solemn countenance of Brother Claus made a sinister impression. The young man from Burgdorf was "seized with confusion before his face";<sup>50</sup> and Bonstetten, too, observes: "We were all terrified as we thanked him, and truly, my hair stood on end, and my voice forsook me."<sup>51</sup> The huge, tall, weatherbeaten figure with its unkempt hair, must have been a purely Gothic sight, as is evident from the description of Petrus Schott: "He was a man with an uncared-for thatch of hair; his face was noble, albeit wrinkled by reason of his leanness, and of an earthy hue, as though it had been powdered with dust; his long, scraggy limbs were covered with only one garment."<sup>52</sup> This almost gloomy-looking *Waldbruder* had a peasant's face, similar to those which are to be seen in pictures of the Russian Staretzes. That Brother Claus was "ugly to behold" and that people "trembled with fear" before him is no exaggeration of posterity.<sup>53</sup> It is unanimously confirmed by all his contemporaries, and most impressively of all in the significant account by Wölflin, to whom we should give all our attention: "As many as approached him were all filled with a great terror when they beheld his solemn countenance. He himself gave as the cause of this terror, the fact that he had once beheld a vast brilliance of light, surrounding a human face; and his heart burst into little pieces, and he trembled with terror. He was completely stupefied, and instinctively turning away his gaze, he stumbled to the ground."<sup>54</sup> Unusual visions have stamped this man, if we only call to mind the grievous

experience under the hedge at Liestal. The hermit of the Ranft had been struck by the power of God, and it made men recoil from before him. Brother Claus was close to the people, but he was also a man withdrawn, and we must examine both sides of him. At all events the perception of this ghastly terror decides, even to-day, the question of whether we are to discover the genuine countenance of Brother Claus or a formally trim portrait of the nineteenth century, the innocuous insignificance of which has nothing whatever to do with our subject. The true, unknown Brother Claus who lived in the depths of the gorge was of a sinister appearance, and we must stand firm by this terrifying countenance, if we would experience anything of his blissful and blissful-making Divine reality.

Through this religious awe the Friend of God exercised a mighty power of attraction. As a man who knew life, who had spent fifty years in the world and had himself experienced unrest, he was admirably qualified to minister to spiritual needs. "Not talkative and aloof from strangers," as one account has it.<sup>55</sup> As a matter of fact the contemplative hermit of the Ranft was not quick to open his mouth. He did not fight with Bible quotations, and authentic sayings of his are comparatively few. The very fact that he did not speak much is significant. As a mystic he knew that the Divine attribute is silence rather than speech, and that it is better to speak to God than of God. But when Brother Claus did speak, his speech was by no means "innocuous and tedious," as it had once been reported. Then it was that there came forth that wisdom, which, according to the Proverbs of Solomon, "crieth at the gates," and is not heard by men. A single word from Brother Claus could often enlighten a man more than philosophical theological treatises could. It never takes the form of an ingenious pronouncement, but always has that indefinable grace of the healer of souls which unlocks men's hearts. According to the old accounts the holy peasant possessed a "profound gift of discernment far above his natural background," which at once struck his visitors.<sup>56</sup> In connection with this some inimitable scenes have been enacted in the Ranfttobel, and more than one man has found himself seen through and his haughty conceit pricked. On one occasion, how relentlessly did he show up a certain miserly Abbot, whose soul clave to money! Brother Claus was an acute and reliable counsellor. With his dispassionate realism he imparted no impracticable advice, rather did he give his visitors sound and lucid instructions. Nevertheless he himself remained free from all exaggeratedness even in his visions, for according to him one could only arrive at a knowledge of God by way of the Ten Commandments. He also had the fine gift of "not only admonishing simple souls, but also of comforting the sad and dejected ones."<sup>57</sup> This activity is invariably one of the surest signs of a minister of souls who has the Divine grace. The hermit was also sought out by many persons suffering from bodily ills, who commended themselves to his intercession, and who were cured through him. The *Parish Register of Sachseln*, which was compiled after his death, contains many entries which confirm this. Scarcely anyone left the Swiss Staretz without receiving from him the word which was to set him on his life's way, and which was just

at he had needed. To the young man from Burgdorf he gave the instruction: "If thou wouldst serve God, then must thou heed no man."<sup>58</sup> When Brother Claus left only this one sentence behind him, we would know what sort of a man he was. Without the discernment of this veryatum he would not himself have gone down into the Ranft; and it attains, moreover, the rule of conduct which every man who seeks God must observe, if he is not to stick fast. Nor is this the only saying of Brother Claus' which shines over Christianity with the radiance of a star. There is a little truth in his statement: "God has so arranged it that man delights in contemplation as though he were going to dance, and conversely He has allowed him to perceive a contemplation which is as though he were in combat."<sup>59</sup> This pronouncement is, of course, as little appropriate as the basis of a detailed meditation. Although such pronouncements, many of them wonderful, lose their magic, when we remove them from the context in which they gave rise to them, it is undeniable that they still show the profound insight which the hermit had received from God. Whence did he derive the underlying wisdom? Certainly not from books, since he could not read, nor from any school since he had never attended one. It can only be explained by constant work and by unceasing thinking on God.

The significance of a man not officially approved, but authorised by God to minister to spiritual needs cannot be emphasised too strongly, for it refers to the most essential part of the whole problem. For a country, such as Staretz is irreplaceable. One cannot put into words what it means for a nation to have such a Divine oracle living in its midst. These men of God are the power stations of a people, and they fight against the powers of evil. They focus all the goodness, and establish a vital national holiness. Often it is through them first of all that the confused meaning of the history of a nation is made clear. In the midst of the events of history they burn like light torches. They present a new phenomenon which cannot be made by any form of art. And although they must be considered as a pure gift from God, which a country undeservedly receives, yet it rests with the men of a nation whether they will believe in such a Staretz or not.

It redounds to the honour of the old Swiss Confederates, who were by no means such brave and virtuous heroes as they have been made out to be, that they did not apathetically pass by the national holiness of the Ranft. They recognised the great Grace, which had been given to them in Brother Claus; and they recognised it in his lifetime, and not, as usually happens, after his death. Moreover, the hermit was repeatedly sought after in political affairs and his advice asked. The saying that no man is a prophet in his own country does not apply to Brother Claus. The governments of Berne, Lucerne, Solothurn, Constance, and even the dukes of Austria and Milan, all of these had recourse to Brother Claus many times as a political adviser. This fact is emphatically borne out by the old sources. Eventually it assumed such proportions that the Friend of God had to provide himself with a seal of his own. According to Trithemius' account "this Brother Claus was held in the greatest honour by the Swiss, they had recourse to him at all times when they were in doubt and took

their intricate problems to him; and the counsels and admonitions of this man were esteemed by them not otherwise than was once the oracle of Pythian Apollo."<sup>60</sup> This remarkable participation in political questions was only possible because the hermit never moved in the unfortunate field of battle between religion and state. In all his political counsels Brother Claus was nevertheless no politician in the usual sense of the word. The relativism of the politician was quite alien to him. No trace was to be found in this detached hermit of the ambition, and the lust for power, the passions which poison nearly all the political activities of men. Brother Claus is one of those rarely encountered examples of the possibility of a man's being able to retain his integrity in the midst of questions of political importance. As one who stood aloof from ordinary affairs, his knowledge was greater than that of mere diplomacy, and with his counsels he advanced steadily into the world of higher politics. His policy had a religious basis and was not just embroiled with religion, as in the case of many Christian professional politicians.

Since the years of Brother Claus' life as an anchorite belonged to the stormy period of Swiss history, he was consulted in many matters by his fellow-citizens. Their problems were never too wordly for him. From out of his deeply rooted feeling for his native home he understood, as few have done, how to weigh and advise with an inner sympathy. The substance of the simple counsels which Brother Claus gave the Swiss, to whom he was an indispensable adviser, is worthy of remark. Even in 1474 he warned them to "eschew foreign lords and their money; and with one accord truly and in harmony to wait upon their own land and its freedoms, and piously to adhere to righteousness."<sup>61</sup> With his clear perception he soon saw that the career of the mercenary was one of the greatest cancers eating into the body of the Confederacy. The value of this warning is in no way diminished because it went unheeded, and because his own sons were guilty of this same vice. Yet, in the end, the Swiss were to come back to his words. That his rejection of the mercenary profession was, later on, first taken up by the Swiss Reformers, contributed much to the maintenance of his prestige amongst the Protestants as well. Brother Claus gave a warning against the Swiss expansionist policy, which was looming up as a result of the wars with Burgundy, and he said to the Swiss: "If ye remain within your frontiers, then can no man overthrow you; but ye would overcome your enemies at all times, and be victors. But if ye are led astray by avarice and the lust for power, and your domain beginneth to extend abroad, then shall your power not last for long."<sup>62</sup> The old Swiss Confederates would have been spared much blood and tears, if they had only heeded his counsel to make "the town not too large." With his warning against foreign disputes and foreign alliances, Brother Claus laid the foundation stone of Swiss neutrality. He in no way sought to keep Switzerland out of the trend of European development, but with acute perception he saw that the strength of the Confederacy lay in her smallness, and that her old desire to emulate the great powers must inevitably lead to disaster. His warnings, especially after the unhappy experiences of Marignano, pointed the right way for

Swiss policy. And they gave rise to the belief that Brother Claus possessed the "spirit of prophecy, and had foretold much of the future to his people, which afterwards came true."<sup>63</sup> Even in the twentieth year of the sixteenth century his vaticinations were still being applied to the present.

However, what principally concerned the hermit of the Ranft was the preservation of peace. "Highly did he praise obedience and peace; and this peace he ever exhorted the Swiss to preserve, and also all those who went to him."<sup>64</sup> His love of peace, based on his religiousness, was constant in its genuineness, and was not affected in any way by the war which had turned out favourably for the Confederacy. In his letter to the government of Berne, Brother Claus thought it desirable to remind the noble lords of an imperishable truth: "Peace is at all times in God, therefore God is part of peace. Peace cannot be destroyed, but peacelessness will be destroyed. See to it, then, that ye do seek out the way of peace, and give shelter to your widows and orphans, as ye have done heretofore."<sup>65</sup> With his unwearying exhortations to peace the Saint stood outside his age, and had to swim against the current. At that time the sword of a Swiss sat lightly in its sheath, and this urgent exhortation to peace could scarcely have been what he delighted to hear. Furthermore, while the pacifists of our own time attempt to impress their fine programmes on the governments, and are invariably shaken off by the latter, it was quite the reverse case with Brother Claus, who was continually being sought out by statesmen in his remote gorge, although he told them nothing which would make them happy. From this difference it may be concluded that with his prayer "to God, that He might make peace,"<sup>66</sup> he did not mean man's pacifism, which, with all its good intentions, is always a feeble affair, but that wonderful *Treuga Dei*, which, like the unending peace of the Sabbath, must come down from Heaven to the Earth.

The climax of the Saint of the Ranft's endeavours for peace was reached after the Burgundian War, when Switzerland had not grown inwardly as the result of its glorious victory. Despite several meetings of the national assembly they were unable to solve the problem which was so much disputed. Contradictions were hurled against each other with unabated vehemence, and the situation was growing more and more confused. Tempers grew so heated that in the end there was no way out at all. The whole Swiss nation anxiously watched the Assembly at Stans which was to settle once and for all the deeply-rooted conflict between town and country. But the innate obstinacy of the Swiss came disastrously to the fore; instead of combining to find a solution, the stubborn deputies merely aggravated their disputes with each other. The Assembly was on the verge of being completely wrecked, and the triumphant Confederacy stood on the brink of civil war. In this grave danger, in which the continued existence of the country hung in the balance, there had hastened half a year previously from Kriens to Stans, Pastor Heino am Grund, with the object of consulting Brother Claus, with whom he had already had dealings. It was a hard journey, more than four hours long, which Heino am Grund had to make in mid-winter over the icy paths, in order to talk the matter

over with the hermit of the Ranft. Their deliberations lasted all night, and dawn was breaking when the priest set out on his return journey. Had he come too late? Had not the lords already in a high fury fallen out with one another? Bathed in perspiration, Heino am Grund was back in Stans, and none too soon, for the deputies to the Assembly were on the point of saddling their horses with a view to cutting their Gordian knot with the might of the sword. With tears in his eyes the pastor of Stans besought them to reassemble just once more, since he had a message for them from Brother Claus. He did not tell them what it was at once, for Brother Claus had expressly forbidden him to do so outside the Assembly. They must have been powerful, searing words, for not without good reason would the priest have run so breathlessly back to Stans.

When the angry lords were once more met together and the excited priest gave them the hermit's answer, the unexpected happened. Brother Claus himself came among them! Not in the body, but in the spirit did he move through the lines of angry deputies, spreading among them with the unique authority that was his an atmosphere of trustfulness. The invisible presence of the hermit showed itself as a spiritual force which overcame the crazy stubbornness of the disputatious swordsmen. The shadow of Brother Claus brought about an immediate transformation by virtue of which the meeting took an unexpected turn. Instead of arrogant obduracy there was a readiness for mutual understanding. Where they had vainly striven with each other for so many days, everything was now settled in the space of an hour. Brother Claus' message did not go out in general terms but only in the exhortation: "Be one, one, one!" The situation was so grave that it demanded concrete proposals if it were to be met, and this alone was suitable to the practical temperament of the Swiss. But Brother Claus, as the original Swiss, the *Urschweizer*, was able to put himself in the position of the Confederates, and yet, at the same time, to contemplate it from without. He forced nothing strange on the deputies, and submitted no proposal which was not peculiarly suited to them. Still less did he attempt to effect a compromise on the basis of give and take. Rather was the solution which he recommended made up of a number of ideas which were already in the air. According to his proposal the administration of the civil law should be divided up among the cities, and the rights of the country districts observed. For the first time the eight old places concluded a common alliance, so that now, in place of the separate alliances, a Confederate union was formed, which greatly strengthened national unity. This community of the eight places included in the alliance Freiburg and Solothurn, which had fought in the Burgundian War, and in this way the Confederacy became extended into a community speaking two languages. By means of this plan the hermit had decided the matter once and for all, inasmuch as the new order of things was born out of his mind. It all happened without Brother Claus being there in person. His name moved like a spirit through the ranks of the Assembly. His prestige among the Confederates must indeed have been tremendously high. No one else could have been able, as he was, to make the disunited Assembly incline to one

word from him. The so-called *Stanserverkommenis*, which was inspired in him, laid the foundation stone of the old Swiss constitution, which outlasted the disruption of the Reformation, and continued until the French Revolution. In one of her most critical hours the hermit of the Ranft had rescued Switzerland from the disasters of civil war, and performed a miracle of reconciliation, which is perhaps even mightier than the miracle of his fasting. With justice did the protocol of the Assembly of Deputies charge Huse to report "the loyalty, exertion, and toil, which the pious man, Brother Claus, has used in these things; wherefore he is truly to be thanked."<sup>67</sup> A heartfelt sigh of relief was breathed through all the valleys of Switzerland when, on December 22nd, 1481, the churchbells pealed throughout the land giving the happy news of the union, which thus, just before Christmas, fulfilled once again the Divine message of "Peace on Earth."

With this act, which could only have been brought about by a Saint who was not involved in party quarrels, and who, moreover, in his selflessness, had no thought for personal advantage, Brother Claus was inscribed for all time in the memory of the Swiss people. He has acquired a lasting significance for the whole of Switzerland, and it is no overstatement to speak of the Saint's real statesmanlike quality. His feat was a great national achievement, which contains not the slightest hint of nationalism. Nearly always a legitimate love of one's country leads to an overstimulated nationalism, to the detriment of other nations. Brother Claus' national consciousness is entirely free of this disease. He helped his country in her greatest peril, without breaking the commandment of loving one's neighbour. By this attitude his figure became a symbol for Switzerland, which expresses the spirit of the Confederacy far more profoundly than do the ethical considerations underlying the story of William Tell.

## V

From time to time an air of tragedy is permitted to surround the great man of peace of the Ranft, regarding the great religious bone of contention. He can in no way be made responsible for this abuse, since he himself had no share in the religious disputes. Brother Claus belongs to the pre-Reformation period, and it is quite impossible to assert what attitude he would have adopted when the Christian faith was split into two. We must leave him alone in his earthly kingdom, for he is much too serious and unique a character to be involved in the arguments of the different Christian views. To him we should not apply the question, "What he means to us, and what he cannot mean to us."<sup>68</sup> The friend of God must not be made the private property of one particular group, which would merely be for the worst, since he would be lost to one half of Switzerland. All creeds must unite in saying of this man: "Then there would be a rich heritage to enjoy."<sup>69</sup>

From the religious point of view Brother Claus must be regarded as a Saint, in the Christian meaning. All the accounts which celebrate him

purely as a national hero, reveal only half the truth. The Swiss Staretz was holy, for his life was that of a Saint. That is why, even in his own lifetime, the people felt him to be a "living Saint."<sup>70</sup> Trithemius says: "On all lips to-day is he granted the title of Saint."<sup>71</sup> With the hermit of the Ranft we have the unusual case of a Saint being acknowledged as such in his own lifetime, and not at a later period when people knew nothing certain about him. The honouring of him sprang from the people themselves, who have an unerring sense for this, and who raised an altar to him, since this was not permitted by canonical law.<sup>72</sup> People usually stone their prophets first, and recognise them afterwards. But they love their Staretzes with full hearts, and bow themselves before them in the consciousness that for their sake God will preserve a land, and not let it perish. Even to-day this late Gothic figure powerfully seizes on the mind of anyone who is occupied with him; and this permits one to feel an inexpressible joy that there was once such a phenomenon in the midst of the turbulent old pages of Swiss history. The deeper one penetrates into this Saint, the more does the significance of Brother Claus increase, and whoever "fully studies his appearance, understands him as the eternal admonisher."<sup>73</sup>

Wherein lay the peculiar character of this Saint, which is valid even to-day? This is not so easy to say, and it has been comparatively little considered. The answer to the question may be found, firstly, in the realisation that this Christian Saint has at all times been called by the most beautiful word in human speech: Brother Claus. His aim was to be a Friend of God, and in striving towards this end he became a Brother to the Swiss; and he experienced and shared with them their sorrows and their joys, and accompanied them loyally through bright days and dark. As no other personality in Swiss history has done, he has given a new and deeper note to the name of Brother. Although he dwelt apart from his people, he felt himself united to all Christians, and to him was revealed again, inimitably, the secret of eternal brotherliness. For this reason the name of Brother Claus remains the highest mark of honour of this Saint, who was able, in the end, to join God and his native land in a way which will for ever occupy the imagination of the Swiss people.

Theresa of Avila

(1515—1582)

I

ON THE westernmost limits of the continent there lies a country which belongs to Europe and is yet something quite distinct. Even though Spain be not considered as a unit on its own, it is, all the same, very different from the other western countries. This differentness, which is to be discerned in her art, is the result, amongst other things, of her proximity to Africa.<sup>1</sup> The hot breath of the black continent is wafted into one's face in this scorching, arid country. The Moors pushed into Spain by way of Gibraltar, and occupied the country for centuries. Arabic influences seeped into Spanish intellectual life, leaving behind them ineradicable traces. Of no little importance to Spain was her unexpected ascent to world power at the end of the Middle Ages, and the subsequent decline into a "dull apathy and egotism" in which the Peninsula, according to Ortega y Gasset, has remained buried for the last three centuries.<sup>2</sup> This fate has made the land of Philip II into the strangest country of Europe, apart from Russia, and for this reason it is hardly to be approached by a western understanding. In the face of this southern land, with its quality of phantasy, we experience a strange restlessness. Only if Spain is measured with the proper yardstick can we see in her idealism and realism the roots of a national character, which give rise to the "discordant duality of the Spanish soul."<sup>3</sup>

Spanish Christianity is not easily intelligible to the northern mind. By taking the lead in the Counter-Reformation, it earned the ill-repute of a dark fanaticism. Of the religiousness of Spain, one usually knows only that it was the home of the Inquisition, which, with its ghastly instruments of torture, crushed out all spiritual freedom. And even though we may point to Spain purely as the cradle of Jesuitism, we still know nothing of her faith. This popular conception overlooks the centuries-long war, which this country waged against the Saracens for the preservation of the Christian religion, and which can only have arisen from a conscious pride of faith. Naturally, there is much which one could say about Spanish Christianity in the negative sense; but beside the dark pages we must not neglect the bright. One thing at least cannot be denied to Spanish religiousness: greatness and force. The founders of its Orders are incarnations of metaphysics, and its kings sacrificed world dominion for their Catholicism. Spain was predestined to bring forth Saints of the greatest stature. We should not speak of Christianity without taking into account its Spanish stamp. The ignoring of Spain and Spanish religiousness was felt to be one

of the essential flaws in Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity.<sup>4</sup> There is no cause to overlook Spanish Christianity any longer, for there can be no renewal of Christendom without due regard being paid to the essential elements of Spanish religiousness. One of the most enduring memorials to the religious spirit of Spain is to be found in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Cervantes has penetrated into the heart of his people, and his masterpiece must not be lightly dismissed as a mere satire on knight errantry. Don Quixote, with his spiritual ecstasies, revolves round metaphysical problems, and in his words there flames up that Heavenly madness, which springs also from the lips of the Spanish Saints. It is in this religious sense that Unamuno has interpreted the lean, gaunt knight. The finest appraisal came from Dostoevsky: "In the whole world there is nothing more profound and more powerful than this poem. It is, up till now, the last and greatest word of human thought; it is the bitterest irony which man has been able to express; and if the earth were to stop spinning, and men were asked, 'Have you understood your life on earth? What conclusion have you drawn from it?' Then could man point silently to Don Quixote: 'That is the conclusion which I have drawn from life; could you condemn me, taking him into account?'"<sup>5</sup>

The fairest flowering of the Spanish religious spirit is to be seen in its mysticism, the examination of which has, strangely, been "excessively neglected" (Holl). That Spanish mysticism, with the exception of providing a comprehension of a spiritual life, requires no new examination to-day, and has no bearing on reality, these are misconceptions which it has had to endure.<sup>6</sup> In actual fact it is one of the most sublime phenomena in the spiritual history of Christianity. If we would experience what is the glowing ardour of true faith, which is all consumed in the welfare of the soul, then we must read the Spanish mystics.<sup>7</sup> They are the mightiest awakeners of the soul, for which they have spoken the most real of words. It is romance mysticism which has given rise to Spain's most moving pathos. By means of this Spain has given its most profound utterance to the world. This austere mysticism, of course, is quite out of the question for the general masses. For such a purpose it is much too far removed from normality, and with its complete disdain for the world, demands much too much. The Spanish mystics had the courage to go through to the very end, and were unafraid of the ultimate consequences. They are the strongest possible contradiction to mediocrity. With their burning fire they form a continuation of, even an advance on, the German mysticism of the Middle Ages. Their holy earnestness was of such hardihood, that to the eyes of rationalists it was bound to appear to be sheer madness.

The summit of Spanish mysticism is Theresa of Avila, one of the greatest women in the history of the world. It is no easy task to write about Theresa, and those who have attempted to do so have rarely been able to enter her mind. It may be added that there is nothing at all which can come up to her, and there is scarcely no comparison which she cannot sustain. She appears at the greatest hour in the history of Spain, when universal fame smiled on her country. With her conception of honour and glory, and

her pride—of which she would tolerate no discussion, which she regarded with disdain—she is a purely Spanish figure, in whom her country recognised the deepest expression of its essence. Not for nothing was she placed as the national Saint of Spain, by the side of the Apostle James. To understand her nature we should not begin with that picture of her which a bad painter made, giving her rigid features, and of which Theresa's own words have come down to posterity: "God forgive thee, Brother John, thou hast painted me after all, but thou hast painted me most hideously."<sup>8</sup> From the fact that she never tried to conceal her feminine nature, she has been called the first modern Saint. By one she has been described as a "Christian Amazon," and by someone else as "the Princess of Spanish Mysticism"; and by reason of her talented genius she borders on the superhuman. But better than all these titles was Pascal's sigh of "Great Theresa!" With her ardent soul she thirsted, as few men have, after "great things." In her burning desire to "have no limit in the service of God," and in her bold watch-word, "die or suffer," we may contemplate the whole uniqueness of her soul. Theresa cannot be set beside normal standards. She is a phenomenon the like of which is not to be found in every century. What an unusual human being it was who said: "Moreover, everything that I see comes to me as out of a dream; and I might seem to be ill in the same way that now I am. I pray Your Grace, let us all become fools for love of Him, Who was so called for our sake."<sup>9</sup> This great lover of the Church has said things which, as it were, stun the reader at first sight, and yet which continually re-echo through him. Hers is a spiritual power from which we can only escape with difficulty. The Spanish sun which illuminates her, sheds a different light, and turns her into a figure of flame. Theresa is Catholic from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet; but she represents an integral Catholicism. We will have to seek far to encounter her like.

Theresa's was a richly endowed nature, which contained infinite possibilities. One comes again and again to the exasperating evidence of how much greater she is than all the attempts to portray her. But, unobserved in the confusing many-sidedness of her gifts, there is essentially *one* problem, in the last analysis, about which all else revolves; it is this focal point which discloses to us the approach to the Saint. Theresa's great desire was to be able to converse adequately with God. For her, as a Christian, God was not an impersonal Power, as the pantheist conceives the Divine to be. To her, God was a personality Who can engage in conversation with man. The ability to pray is what distinguishes man from beast. Theresa wanted to be able to talk to God, as, it is told, Job did. She fought towards this end for years; and it is this fight which contains the essential meaning of her life. What gives the disruptive emphasis to her existence, which seizes hold of us and draws us along with it, is the way in which she herself conceived this desire. It is in this that she is so totally different from all other Christians. Theresa did not take this business of talking to God as a pure matter or course. She did not regard it as something vague and formal. The substance of her praying was not only made up of please and thank you. She was not interested in the answering of her personal wishes. The

secret contact between God and man, which comes from prayer, she felt to be something of the greatest power, which cannot be compared with anything else, something which leaves man with a profound sense of awe. From this perception spring her words of warning: "If you would speak with God, then must you speak as is befitting to so great a Lord; and it is good that you should reflect Who He is, with Whom you speak, and who you are: and then at least you will speak with due propriety."<sup>10</sup> To a prayer, whereby a man would seek not to be stricken for the consequences of his own deed, Theresa would not grant even the name of prayer, however industriously he might move his lips. With this Spanish Saint we have the feeling that once again a mortal really seeks to converse with God: a human being, who feels the hazards of the endeavour, and who, in the end fully realises what it means for a small, worthless man to dare to address the Eternal. Only a perception of the fact that Theresa speaks of the Almighty as "His Majesty" shows how far removed she is from the insipid thoughtlessness of most Christians, who, with a familiarity which is distinctly out of place, call on God as though He were someone like themselves. Theresa contended for long with God over a form worthy of her personal feeling for Him. She sensed how, precisely in this most intimate domain, the most difficult thing of all would be required of man, and how this, his highest endeavour, could so easily slip into mere ridiculousness. In one last gamble she fought to find a way suitable for speaking with God, until she finally become painfully aware of the fact that it is beyond the power of man to address the Eternal Thou in a fitting manner. This is a grace which can only be given to man. It was granted to her after torturing searchings, and in the end she understood that it is prayer which is the secret gate that leads into the Holy City. Although, moreover, it was pleasant for Theresa "that everyone heard me when I spoke with God,"<sup>11</sup> yet her works provide an incomparable insight into this wonderful feat, beside which nearly all the prayers of men are nothing better than an insipid babbling, and are, indeed, often rejected on account of their presumptuous tone. The life of Theresa must be viewed from the viewpoint of the Great Conversation, which penetrated into an unknown dimension that far outstrips imagination. Theresa's existence is a "Dialogue in the dark, which, in the night of the spirit, now rushes forward, foaming and swirling, now struggles laboriously along."<sup>12</sup> Like a six-winged Cherub, did Theresa sing her "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts," which is worthy to be placed side by side with the *Sanctus* of the great Bach's B minor Mass.

## II

On the instructions of her Father Confessor, Theresa wrote her own biography. This sublime portrayal of a soul has been called a "fascinating and sensitive novel," but this description scarcely does it justice. Happily, Jeanne Galzy has not followed this course in her Theresa novel. The greatness of the exciting spiritual biography of the Nun of Avila lies on a different plane. In her foreword Theresa remarks that she has been granted

full powers to write about her pardon, and that therefore she felt "highly bound" to portray, too, her "wicked life" in the same way.<sup>13</sup> What a picture full of contrasts would arise if she had indeed applied her great spirit to this task, instead of the reader's having to read between the lines, since so much is only hinted at. What a pity that the opportunity was not seized by her timid superiors. For this reason this autobiography, which is one of the most notable memoirs of all time, does not give a clear picture of the real facts of the early period of her life, which is pushed into the background far more than is generally represented. The theme of Theresa's autobiography depicts the experiences of a soul which fought ardently to scale the heights, but which, at first, failed to do so. The first decades of Theresa's life were frittered away with the tragedy of labour expended in vain; this has often been wrongly covered up. Her life story shows no steady line of ascent; rather is it a sharp curve. From these abortive attempts to establish the Great Conversation, the first phase of Theresa's existence acquires its dramatic note, which tells us much more than the traditional mould into which the Saint has been squeezed. While Theresa, for the most part, towers high above ordinary mortals, it is the first part of her life which brings her closer to us, so that suddenly we are able to sense that she too was a figure of flesh and blood.

It is no mere embellishment of legend when Theresa is described as having been a pious child. She was a descendant of the two ancient noble families of Cepeda and Ahumada, both of which were noted for their rigorous Catholicism. Her religious bent was noticeable even in her extreme youth. Her ardent nature was profoundly impressed by the eternity of suffering and glory in the world to come. Before Theresa was yet seven years old she devised the adventurous plan of going begging in the land of the Moors with her brother, where she would suffer a martyr's death, and in this way quickly reach Paradise. This project did not remain a purely fanciful idea; the two children really did run away from their parents' house, and had to be brought back by force. A short while after this Theresa built a small hermitage in the garden, and began to play at nuns with other little girls. Although we should not place too great an importance on these childish games, they do clearly reveal her religious quality.

As a young girl Theresa abandoned these pious impulses. A development, which tended to the superficial, cut across her religious interests and brought about the first flaw in her life. When she was in her teens a number of romances of chivalry fell into her hands, and she devoured them eagerly, for they accorded well with her romantic nature. She lived so intensely in this world of make-believe that she began to write a romance of her own. Simultaneously her natural vanity awoke within her. "It was at this time that I began to appear beautifully dressed and, by means of a well-groomed exterior, to devote myself to attracting attention. To this end I dedicated exceptional care to my hands and hair, and availed myself of all the sweet smelling things which I could procure; and these were not few, for I was passionately fond of dressing up."<sup>14</sup> These exertions were fully and ably supported by her attractive nature, for Theresa was endowed with

a natural charm and a pleasing personality, which made her "beloved by everyone."<sup>15</sup> When she wandered through the town, and walked with her Southern grace through the streets of Avila, it is only too understandable that this pretty, well-set-up girl, in her bright orange dress, with her well-formed figure, her delicate white complexion, her beautifully curled hair, and her black eyes, should draw after her the gazes of all who saw her. By all reports which come down to us Theresa was extraordinarily beautiful.<sup>16</sup> The girl was greatly admired by everyone, and it is possible that she had a youthful love affair with her elder cousin. Throughout her life she retained a passion for everything that glittered, for shining jewels, rich materials, and beautifully carved shrines. Even Bertrand had to acknowledge: "A little sensuousness in her is undeniable: she loved perfumes and every refinement of personal neatness, by which great store was set in those days."<sup>17</sup> This youthful phase should not be dismissed as purely innocuous. Theresa was seriously threatened. One cannot avoid having the reluctant feeling that she might just as easily have taken the wide and easy path. And, in all truth, she was not far from it. There were tendencies in Theresa which would lead to her destruction. As with nearly all humans both possibilities were latent in her. The danger of becoming a frustrated genius was present in her to an exceptional degree.

The deeper side of her nature struggled against this development. Her earnest religious need came to the fore again and gave a new turn to her life. After spending a period as a boarder in an Augustinian convent, and undergoing a serious illness, her religiousness won the upper hand again. A terror beset her soul at the thought that she was on the way to Hell. Her passionate dislike of the religious vocation, which she had experienced in her adolescence, was gradually washed away. At the same time she still had to overcome powerful spiritual opposition within her, before she was able to respond to the imperious summons of the Cloister. By her own account she had to endure a fearful struggle which raged within her for no less than three months. She suffered from attacks of fever and sudden fainting fits. It was no religious experience which drove her into the Order, and Theresa's entrance into the cloistered world could in no way be likened to the triumphant progress of a hero. She herself described it as an agonising pain, but her religious quality persisted stubbornly along its appointed course. In the end, however, her high resolve prevailed, although she stated frankly, "It seems to me, however, that in this matter of my entering the Cloister, I was induced more by cringing fear than by love."<sup>18</sup> Her father, moreover, flatly refused to give his consent, and Theresa therefore had no option but to go against his wishes, and she stilled her mounting doubts with the reflection that only God could have inspired her with such an idea. One morning—the memory of this great moment was to remain with her for the rest of her life—Theresa, not yet twenty years old, fled from her father's house, and with pounding heart, knocked at the door of the Carmelite Convent. And as she entered the cloister she was at once filled with that great recompense of joy which God is wont to bestow on those who overcome their reluctance to enter His service. Theresa was a zealous

nun, who performed all her duties with scrupulous conscientiousness, and did not shun the lowliest of tasks. Even at that time she was permeated with the feeling of God's greatness, and regarded it as the duty of a nun to think only of His glorification. One year after entering the convent she began practising the inward praying, which was the prelude to her Great Conversations.

Once again, however, the course of Theresa's life took an unexpected turning, which prevented her from reaching her goal at once. After a while her religious earnestness began to wane perceptibly, and the enthusiasm with which she had entered the convent began to cool off. Moreover, she had to learn the painful truth that a man cannot flee from the world unless he has first conquered himself. And although the doorway into the cloister is small, it was not, in the Spain of those days, narrow enough to prevent a great deal of idle vanity from slipping through. Theresa herself spoke of people who had abandoned the world in order to serve God far from its hazards, and who, on entering the cloister, "found themselves all at once in ten worlds."<sup>19</sup> Her youth provoked her into doing things with which after entering the convent she should have had no dealings. Her temperament was too lively to permit her to become a contemplative Bride of Christ all at once. Furthermore, the state of the convents of the time helped her little in her attempt to reach her goal, since there was no sort of supervision. The nuns went like bees in and out of the convent as they pleased. Throughout the day they received visitors in the convent parlour, entertaining them to their hearts' content for hours on end. Without pausing to reflect, Theresa joined in this amusing way of life. It was not malicious gossip that even then she had "clung to the principle that she would have nothing to do with nor to say about any man, nor would have people say this of her."<sup>20</sup> It was not a question of slander in its usual meaning. Everything with Theresa, right from the very beginning, is much more refined and subtle. But notwithstanding this fineness, entanglements were no less dangerous for her. On the contrary, it made it much harder for her to perceive when she went astray. Unconsciously she hit the nail on the head in a charming *causerie*, which is quite devoid of religiousness, and which summed up her whole existence in the sentence: "I know nothing but how to talk." In view of the times in which she lived this is a most revealing statement; the widespread taste for social intercourse had seized hold of her, preventing her from inward concentration. And the latter is absolutely indispensable for a serious relationship with God. "I began to throw myself from one amusement into another, from one vanity into another, and from one opportunity into another."<sup>21</sup> In spite of the apparent harmlessness of this pleasurable existence, she found herself seized by a thousand restraining impulses, which held her in a thousand-threaded net from which there was no escape. Implicit in her continual chattering and gossiping was a waste of time to which, in the case of a normal man one could scarcely take exception, but which in the case of Theresa, called by God to higher things, can only be qualified as sin.

This unreligious way of life on the part of a nun could only lead to a

grievous situation, which took the form of a torturing division within her. On the one hand, when she first entered the convent, Theresa had undergone significant religious experiences. She had accepted the priceless gift of tears, "which had melted her hard heart." With the "eyes of the soul" she had seen Christ, from Whom she had received an impression of "exceeding great beauty." Similarly, she had made progress in her life of prayer, even if only in a transient way. On the other hand, she was prevented from devoting herself utterly to her attraction to the Divine by innumerable trifling affairs into which she threw herself with no little zest. The idle gossip and chit-chat of the parlour, the many visits she paid to her relatives, and an all-too-interesting friendship with a priest—these things, also, were of great importance to Theresa. She was not yet ready to renounce these pleasant diversions, to which she was bound as by a chain. Given over to vain frivolities, it was as though she had been caught for ever in the gaudy fair of life. "Yet the life that I led then was filled with anguish, for on the one hand God called to me, and on the other hand I followed the way of the world; while I had great joy in all the things of God, yet was I held in fetters by the things of the world. It was as though I had been two separate entities, striving to unite into one a spiritual life and the vanity of sensuous pleasures and delights."<sup>22</sup> Naturally, even at this time, Theresa was a lover of God, but her Eros led her the wrong way: she had not yet learned to understand the profound nature of the Divine Love, whose essential meaning is to embrace *One only*, One, moreover, Who knows no limit or term. Since she had not the strength to want one thing only, she remained, as it were, split into halves. And this partition could only lead to a fruitless duality or ambivalence in which one tendency cancelled out the other so that she could make no spiritual progress at all. This contradictory mode of life did not last for a mere fortnight: she spent nearly twenty years in striving to make fire and water flourish side by side, and even as she approached her fortieth year she was still entangled in her maze of contradictory confusions. "I found no delight in God, nor any pleasure in the world. When I gave myself up to worldly joys, I suffered grievously from the memory of my debt to God; and when I busied myself with the things of God, my worldly desires left me no peace."<sup>23</sup> Unable to relinquish either, Theresa was caught in a vice between God and the world. She was not yet strong enough to follow God's call, although it sounded so clearly to her ear. Whenever the parlour brought her the tumult and turmoil of the world, all her saintly resolves were swept aside. She did not yet understand how hard it is for man to rise above his sore distress.

The grievous struggle in which she was continually torn from side to side seemed to have no end. Theresa's own moving accounts of this desperate fight read like a bitter lament. As day followed day, she felt as though she were floating on a "turbulent sea," "which would sink down, and then lift me up again, only, unhappily, to sink down yet once more."<sup>24</sup> Theresa has been compared with St. Augustine, in whose *Confessions* she found herself depicted as faithless; but it is an unjust comparison. In the case of St. Augustine we have a pre-Christian Odyssey, which enabled him

to find the true haven after long and weary wanderings. Theresa, on the other hand, recognised, even in her earliest childhood, whither her religious temperament was leading.<sup>25</sup> But in the ascent, toward which she fought with the strength of a drowning man, she met with no success, despite all her desperate endeavours. Inward and outward difficulties continually beset her, driving her back along her path. It oppressed her spirit with the harshness of the task of Sisyphus. It was at this time that Theresa discovered the law of the soul's gravity, even as her contemporary, Kepler, discovered that of the body. For hardly any other Saint was the ascent to God as hard as it was for her. With incessant hardships, she fought her way upwards. Time and again she sought to climb up the sheer perpendicular walls which held her imprisoned, but every time she slipped downwards again. The usual accounts which depict the Saint as being dedicated to God, and pleasing to Him from infancy, come to naught in the case of Theresa, and ill accord with her agonised cry of despair: "Oh long lingering and grievous life! Oh life wherein there is no living, wherein there is only loneliness and no succour. When, Oh Lord, when? How long must it be? What must I do, Oh my Greatest Good, what must I do? Am I to long for no more longing after Thee?"<sup>26</sup> By reason of the unspeakable hardships which attended her religious development there is much to be learned, in a purely negative sense, from Theresa. They make it quite clear that the preparation of a spirit is the hardest thing which there is in life, and the practicability of this is all too rarely taken into account. Only uninterested persons can consider such a task as an easy undertaking. Theresa herself made no attempt to conceal either the difficulties which she had to overcome, nor the defeats which she had to suffer: "I knew that I was caught, but in what way I could not tell. . . . I longed for life, and then I understood that I was not living at all but was fighting with the shades of death; and yet I could find no one to give me life. . . ."<sup>27</sup>

The anguished conflict within Theresa assumed such proportions that she became seriously ill. She began to spit blood, and nervous disorders became apparent which affected her heart and stomach. The doctors who were called in were unable to diagnose her mysterious illness. For four days she remained in a state of catalepsy. Within the precincts of the convent her grave had already been dug, and the Sisters had begun to light tapers around her bed. At the last moment, however, she regained consciousness, and, by a hair's breadth, escaped the dreadful fate of being buried alive. For three years she was paralysed, and her father had to remove her, temporarily, from the convent. Much has already been written about Theresa's illnesses. The Jesuit Father, Hahn, has accused her of hysteria, and others have spoken of epilepsy; and, finally, according to Pascal, "Illness is natural to the Christian." But this interpretation overlooks the real facts of the case; it merely covers up a grievous situation with fine words. Theresa herself described her illness very differently: "Perhaps because I myself practised no penance, God has sent me so many illnesses, and in so doing has Himself laid His penance upon me."<sup>28</sup> Her troubles all arose from the discontentedness of her religious nature. Theresa was ill because she did

not follow her own true calling. Her protracted illness must be viewed in connection with her failure to do so. It was a self-punishment which the spirit inflicted on the body. Theresa's was a nature which led her to endure spiritual rather than physical conflicts. Her misfortunes must also be considered from the standpoint of the denial of her religion, and the fact that Theresa was also often ill during the second and third phases of her life in no way invalidates this view. Her later illnesses were the result of bad medical treatment which she underwent, since she was being treated for a physical disease, although in reality she was suffering in the spirit.<sup>29</sup>

Side by side with her long years of negligence in the convent must be set her awareness of her sins, which is evident in the pages of her autobiography. She wrote of her "great sins," which she was not allowed "to describe in detail," and called herself a "wicked woman."<sup>30</sup> She considered no repentant suffering as too great, and "wept for herself," and "mostly do I weep for the time when I had no tears for my way of life."<sup>31</sup> It was for this reason that she felt herself drawn to Mary Magdalene with whom, she perceived, she had kindred traits. Even when she was dying, Theresa regarded herself as the "greatest sinner in the world," who had "so little heeded" the rules and dispositions of her Order.<sup>32</sup> These avowals are by no means pleasing to her editors, and they invariably accuse her of exaggerating.<sup>33</sup> Yet this gives rise to an almost comical situation. Christianity lays great emphasis on the sinfulness of man, and yet if a Saint should lay claim to sin, then the editors will hasten to assure the reader of his writings that the confession must be considered "as a sort of trap!"<sup>34</sup> But this kind of apologia merely succeeds in shedding doubt on the reality of Theresa. If Theresa really had been exaggerating in describing the consciousness of her sinfulness, then it is obvious that she must also have overshot the mark of veracity in her other accounts and descriptions. Yet this suspicion is quite out of place in both respects. The Spanish nun was a most exceptional lover of the truth, and the consciousness of her sins was certainly not based on any imaginary scruples.

For Theresa really was a great sinner. But we must be careful not to attribute any sense of moral failing to the words, for this would give too primitive an interpretation of sin. We have already had occasion to point out that with Theresa everything takes place on a high level. Theresa's sin was that she did not follow the call of God. With her exceptionally talented nature, she was summoned by God to greatness. Yet, with all her wealth of gifts, she hesitated to give herself up utterly to His service. For the first half of her life Theresa was the perfect example of the versatile, talented human: a person who enjoys no spiritual harmony, who is possessed of a thousand and one interests, yet is not strong enough to discard any of them or to weld them all together, with the result that, in the end, all the talents dwindle away to nothing. Theresa made no use of the grace with which she was imbued, and hid her talent away in her kerchief. With this highly gifted genius everything tended to be submerged in the mire of daily life; and Theresa clearly illustrated a seldom recognised danger which besets the human who strives after religiousness: that if there is no certainty





regarding the goal to which one aspires the result will inevitably come to naught, however fair the beginning may have been. She was already half-way through her life, but had not yet determined on the definitive form of her existence. Although she had now worn the veil for many years, she had not succeeded in coming any nearer to God. She was missing her true calling by the narrowest of margins, and very nearly let it slip altogether. The hiding away of a talent given by God is one of man's greatest sins; for it is the harshest of all fates to have to say, "Too late! For ever too late!" For this reason the repentant suffering of Theresa's soul must have been grievous and tearful indeed: the consciousness of her sin was genuine, and in no way feigned or affected. Her life progressed like a tragedy, and although no blood flows in the last act of this play, this in no way detracts from the dramatic sense of violent catharsis. And yet the conception of tragedy in this connection is not quite right, for it implies the pagan image of a Fate, falling blindly on mankind. And over Theresa there hung the vault of a Christian Heaven, which turned aside the impending doom, and led her in the end to a glorious victory over the infernal powers.

Had Theresa's sin been that of the man who did not use his talent, it is probable that she would never have succeeded in triumphing over herself. She had already grown accustomed to see-sawing up and down, and yet she knew that "upon constant perseverance depends all our weal."<sup>35</sup> And God came to her aid, and brought the shameful comedy to an end. She has emphasised with the utmost clarity that she herself did not bring about the change. God gave her His assistance to win the long upward climb to her goal; and she called her autobiography *The Book of the Mercies of God*. One day, when Theresa entered her private oratory, her gaze fell on a painting which showed Christ tied to a pillar. It was a genuinely Spanish representation of the Scourging of Christ, which depicted with realism the blood dripping from His wounds. The Lord's suffering was so vividly depicted that one could not but be moved by the bruised appearance. Although Theresa had naturally seen many pictures of the Stations of the Cross, this picture of Christ's Martyrdom suddenly made an entirely new impression on her. She received the dreadful reality of the Scourging into her soul for the first time, and as the result of her contemplation of it she was "utterly dismayed to behold the Saviour so grievously ill-treated."<sup>36</sup> A flood of tears poured from her eyes, and it seemed that her very heart would break from the sudden shock of realisation. Stricken with compassion, she threw herself down before the picture and prayed that God would at last give her the strength nevermore to go against His commandments. This experience in the oratory, facing the representation of *Ecce Homo*, marked the decisive change in Theresa's life. Its importance can hardly be overestimated. When she knelt down at last before the figure of Christ Theresa's erratic progress to and from God came to an end. The second half of her life had begun, and all the scenery was completely changed.

## III

"This is another, a new book, or rather a new life. What I have written up till now has been my own life; but what I have lived from this point onwards, in which period I have achieved a state of prayer, is the life of God in me."<sup>37</sup> In these words Theresa herself has clearly marked out the dividing line in her life. Worlds lie between the two phases, and it often seems to be a different human being who speaks in each of them. In between, Theresa had suffered immeasurably, and soon after her conversion she shared the mighty experience that shows so clearly that holiness is always a matter of choice, and, what is more, despite one's own violent wishes, always the choice of God Himself. What happened to Theresa is something which no man can accomplish on his own. It either does come over one, or it does not. Only by reason of what Theresa was now to experience did she enter history and her figure acquire its overpowering quality. We have not here a growth but a sudden ascent which gave rise to the greatness of Theresa's life, and which was soon to lead to such heights that one can find nothing comparable to it.<sup>38</sup>

Her new relationship to God must be regarded as the Great Conversation upon which Theresa now engaged, and which filled her whole spirit utterly. It is highly remarkable that it should be precisely she who was honoured with this Grace, she who so often when the bells marked the end of the hours of prayer had been longing for this very thing. But then there fell "from the fire within the glowing cauldron," as she described God, a little spark which kindled her soul, lighting within her an immense burning brand which it was quite beyond her power to master. From now on, in her conversations with God, Theresa used the great ABC, which was uttered before the Eternal Majesty as the *ultimum* of veneration. It is true that she did not come upon the most fitting words on the very first day of her transformation; but she regarded herself from thenceforth as being "on the way of prayer,"<sup>39</sup> along which she strode unflinching forwards, and in which "the greatest difficulties lay in making a beginning."<sup>40</sup> This Great Conversation of Theresa's must not be confused with oral praying which one learns in childhood, and with which Theresa also was obviously familiar. Moreover, although she herself did not recognise a reasonable petition addressed to God as a valid substitute for prayer, she had nothing to say against it. She saw clearly that many Christians would never get beyond this stage of intercourse with God. Her religious fervour could never be satisfied with praying aloud as the beads of the rosary slipped through her fingers. Her spirit required something much more than this. Theresa had to rise above this lowly state, to get away from meaningless formulae, where a man does not have to think at all, or else regards God as a useful storage place and the fulfiller of his own selfish wishes. And although oral prayer has a certain amount of justification, the person who is satisfied with a mechanical rattling off of a string of phrases must always remain a mere groundling in religious experience and never approach that higher way of prayer which needs no words at all.

Understanding this, Theresa began her life of inward prayer. To do so, the nun sought solitude, collected her thoughts—which demanded a considerable amount of will-power from one of her liveliness—and endeavoured to hear nothing and to see nothing. She must have experienced violent emotional agitation before she could quell her senses, since only when man is passive is God's activity manifested. Theresa did not intend anything secret in her inward praying; she understood it primarily as a reverent awareness of God, through which a man must pass, if he would speak with Him in his praying.<sup>41</sup> During her inward praying Theresa made it clear that she saw the Eternal the whole time, and that she sought to retain this feeling of His presence. Even during her daily tasks she endeavoured to remain in constant association with God so that she would not lose this precious awareness of Him for a single minute. According to Theresa there is no greater good in life than the "practice" of this,<sup>42</sup> and she counsels all who have ever begun to enjoy this gift of inward prayer never, in any circumstances, since they have also wrought so much evil, to give it up again. "To my way of thinking inward prayer is simply a friendly relationship" with God,<sup>43</sup> it is the door to the fortress of the soul, the means whereby God permits mankind to share in His favour. By means of this praying from the heart, in which God is honoured in spirit and in truth, man approaches his highest destiny, the true adoration of the Almighty. The petty whirl and flurries of life which had so fascinated Theresa up till then all of a sudden subsided and from thenceforth remained far behind her; and even in her inward prayer she no more longed for the gifts of God—earthly prayer she abominated—she now longed only for God Himself . . .

This first act of Grace, which Theresa experienced on her ascent to the Eternal, had the effect of lifting her suddenly out of herself. Up till then she had never experienced an ecstasy. But now she heard what the words told her in a vision: "From henceforth thou shalt not associate with men but with Angels."<sup>44</sup> When she heard these words, Theresa was seized with a great fear. God had never given her such a commandment before. In order to speak with Angels only, and not with men, one must feel oneself to be an Angel; and with her knowledge of herself Theresa knew that she was far removed from an angelic state. "It is folly for us to wish to become Angels while we are still sunk so deep down on earth as I was then."<sup>45</sup> Moreover, although she had momentarily recoiled, the commandment of the Eternal Majesty had gone out to her, and like herself, we can only be filled with amazed apprehension. Most of the biographers of Theresa appear to have very little feeling for the grandeur of this bidding of the Lord's. They treat it as though it were the utterance of any common or garden prelate. But there is a captivating nobility in God's demand: it raised Theresa's life up to a height which it is given to few mortals to scale. She, who up till then had swung, irresolute, between God and the world, was now to commune only with the Seraphic Powers of Heaven! One knows only too well what human conversations comprise: in most cases they are filled with depressing banalities. Most of men's utterances are

quite trivial. But what must it be to converse with the Angels, with those Angelic Beings who stand about God's throne? Owing to the poverty of human language it cannot be adequately described. Even Theresa herself was unable to do this. Despite all the almost turbulent eloquence which was hers, the words which were forced from her inspired lips are, in the ultimate analysis, inarticulate. The only thing which is plain to see, is that in some miraculous way the Angels certainly entered into her life—those Angels who are normally hidden from the dull eyes of men. The Angelic Conversation also sets the whole question of the basis of Theresa's mysticism in a new light. Her mystical formation is due exclusively to Spanish writers, especially to Francisco de Osuna and Bernardino de Laredo, who, for their part, found their sources in the writings of the Neoplatonists and the Christian Mystics of the Middle Ages. A reference to this tradition explains some, but not all of the problem. The secret of Theresa's mysticism only becomes clear when we take into account her Angelic Conversations, by means of which she entered into an immediate relationship with transcendental reality.

The association with Angels which now became part of Theresa's very existence took the form of a visionary experience which has no equal. The Great Conversation did not take place in the usual atmosphere but, admittedly, on a quite different plane. Theresa was led on from ecstasy to ecstasy. Whether she wished it or not, her spirit was at times borne away, soaring up to incredible heights. At such times it would seem that nothing lived in her body: it lay as though dead, the warmth fled from it, and it could not stir; the eyes were either shut, or, when open, without the power of sight. Her consciousness was rendered inactive, and her spirit, under the might of God's onslaught, was almost completely annihilated. Theresa speaks of a joy which bordered on pain; and yet, with her "blissful torment," she does not mean a mixture of the two. In an attempt to explain the inexplicable, the Saint drew attention to the strange similarity which exists between ecstasy and death, for in both cases a man receives the impression that the whole world is disintegrating. But even in moments such as these Theresa had a profound feeling of happiness, of pure and unsullied peace, and of utter contentment. The furthest apart poles come into such close contact with each other in the ecstatic experience that it provides something of the very greatest things which are granted to mankind. The nun of Avila herself wrote that "the brilliance of such a vision surpasses anything which one can imagine on Earth . . . It is quite a different light from that which we see on Earth. In comparison with the visionary light the radiance of the sun which we behold appears dark, and it is as though we could never open our eyes again."<sup>46</sup> According to Theresa these visions are not the product of man's spiritual strength; they are wrought by God, since "in ecstasy the true revelations and manifestations of His Grace are to be found."<sup>47</sup> Nothing points more strikingly to the decline of Christianity than does the gradual disappearance of the visionary ecstasy in modern times.

In her autobiography Theresa wrote in detail of how she once saw an

Angel "with a long golden arrow, and on the iron tip of it I seemed to see a little flame. Then it befell that he pierced me with the arrow right into my heart; and when he withdrew it it seemed that he drew my innermost heart out with it. Finally he left me all afire with the burning love of God. The pain of this wound was so great that it did wring from me the groans of distress whereof I have spoken; but, at the same time, the bliss, which this exceeding pain did occasion, was so immense that I could not wish to be free of it, nor could I ever be contented with anything as I was with God."<sup>48</sup> No comment can come up to the level of this experience. In the first place not even an artist can completely portray its truthful quality. In his famous monument in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, in Rome, Bernini attempted to depict this scene. His memorial shows, with plastic clarity, how Theresa lost consciousness, how she sank down into sweet surrender, and how her personality merges together into *one* state of feeling only, which fills her to such an extent that there is room for nothing else. The artist's work has often been condemned on account of its mingling of sensuality and religiousness, and regarded as a typical product of the baroque. But although it must be conceded that Bernini's sense of perception has led him to the very limit of what is admissible, he had, all the same, an awareness of the extraordinary quality which informed the vision of the arrow. How was he to depict the Angelic experience other than by the analogy which he was able to grasp, and which showed Theresa groaning from the overwhelming violence which filled her, leaving her spiritually intoxicated? It is intended merely as an outline of the transfigured face which suggests the very highest of the emotions.

These indescribable ecstasies of Theresa's did not amount to many hours. But these hours were her reward for living, and compensated her for whole years of her life; and the ability to set aside these extraordinary moments at other times is one of the noteworthy characteristics of Spanish mysticism. The most wondrous sweetness flooded through Theresa's inmost being during these ecstatic raptures. In this way the Saint showed that she had understood the inmost essence of the Gospel as that joy and peace which sets free eternal bliss in man and "surpasseth all understanding." To represent Spanish Christianity as purely gloomy melancholy and a turning away from the world is quite wrong. It does, of course, embody certain ascetic elements, but these merely form the outward shell. The inmost core is an exultant jubilation which cannot be put into words, and Theresa's experiences are a clear example of this. When we read her writings we are in no way depressed, rather do we feel exalted by them. They enable us to share in that rapturous intoxication of the spirit which she herself has defined as "glorious madness."<sup>49</sup> She felt no shame at her "Heavenly madness," and candidly admitted: "Often it was as though I were out of my senses, and drunk with Divine love."<sup>50</sup> What a woman, to confess that she was insane with the love of God! Rightly has Theresa been usually termed in the language of the Church, *virgo seraphica*. Thanks to this experience, God to her was a Reality more incontestable than the reality of her daily life. Through her Great Conversation, the Divine

became an oppressive reality which made everything else pale before it. Theresa had attained a state of religious certainty which bestowed on her the highest metaphysical feeling of security. For her existence as a whole the vision of the arrow was of the greatest significance. It was not just the opportunity for her to revel in purely joyous feelings. "A great thing is knowledge,"<sup>51</sup> she wrote, and she made the heroic vow from thenceforth to do in everything what she considered to be perfection, a promise which, according to Liguori, fills even holy men with awe.

The meaning of the commandment that she should speak only with Angels was, in the first place, that Theresa was to give up her idle chattering in the parlour, which for so long had prevented her ascent to God. She had to be rid of the trivialities of idle intercourse which, spiritually, weigh men down, and achieve a higher level in her life. Through the mercy shown to her in her vision she was led towards this goal. The ecstasies overcame her with such force that it was vain for her to fight against them. Moreover, her body, of its own accord, was lifted up off the ground and floated over the Earth, while her countenance gave forth a strange radiance.<sup>52</sup> Her accounts of this would necessarily be viewed with greater misgivings, were they not accompanied by genuine humility, and were it not, also, for the fact that the Saint was so open by nature that she must be believed unreservedly. In point of fact, Theresa herself found her soarings through the air most unpleasing; with sound common sense she realised that this floating over the Earth was too extraordinary a phenomenon, and that it must naturally cause a great sensation. For this reason she tried to keep it a secret as well as she could. But she was bound to fail in this, inasmuch as the enraptured state in which alone these levitations took place left her powerless to control her body. These physical exaltations took place repeatedly in her life. Not only nuns saw her lifted up, but ladies of society, too, saw the act of levitation take place during a sermon, which greatly disturbed their womanly modesty. In this rising up into the air Theresa manifests with the utmost clarity her conquest over the normal sphere and her matchless striving after the Heights. The law of gravity was broken, and as Theresa spoke with the Heavenly Beings she had a presentiment of the nature of the Angels. When we try to form a concrete picture of this frequently attested occurrence we find that there is no standard by which to judge this mysterious phenomenon. But a man must needs be very narrow-minded to ignore the grandeur of this experience which reveals the clear triumph of mind over matter, which is unique to the world of Saints. It is precisely in the apparent impossibility of such an occurrence that there lies a great religious force; and whoever fails to see it in this perspective must necessarily fail also to recognise its profound symbolic nature.

The high point of Theresa's great dialogue is provided by its fusion into one, its union, the nature of which is so sublime that we may not dismiss it lightly. Only in inaccessible solitude can there take place this mystic marriage which defies all normal conceptions. Theresa wrote repeatedly of this Mystery, and the most impressive passage is to be found in the post-

humorous appendix to her autobiography. She described how the Lord had held out His right hand to her, and said: "Look on this nail; it is a sign that from to-day thou art My bride. Hitherto thou hast not deserved this; but in the future thou shalt be zealous to honour Me, and not only because I am thy Creator, thy King, and thy God, but also inasmuch as thou art truly in the relationship of one betrothed to Me. From now on, therefore, is thy honour Mine, and My honour thine."<sup>53</sup> This experience, which is to be regarded as an *unio mystica*, marks the last stage in Theresa's approach to God, and one cannot but be amazed at the prodigious boundlessness implicit in the words. Had not Theresa, on this occasion, overstepped the limits to which a Christian is subject? Had she not gone too near to the fire? We have her own statement in this connection: "Often does His Majesty proclaim His great love for me in the words 'Thou art now Mine, and I am thine.'"<sup>54</sup> But these considerations are swept aside by the sheer force of the experience which befell a human to whom all sense of *hubris* was unknown, and who always attached the greatest importance to humility. It affords a curious paradox that it should be precisely Theresa, who called for the highest veneration to God's Majesty, who herself experienced a union with God Himself, a union, moreover, which dissolved her whole existence. The religious exaltation which filled her could never be surpassed. In the fusion of Theresa with God, Spanish mysticism celebrates its greatest triumph. What would Nietzsche have said in the face of such an expression of religiousness? He could not endure the existence of God, even though there might have been gods, and in this based his argument against Christianity. Certainly Theresa did not become God, but her soul did, as it were, flow into God. The extraordinary marriage ceremony of this woman has rarely been adequately assessed: the demands it makes on the interpreter are all too great. Only one man seems to have divined something of this "lightning happiness":<sup>55</sup> this was the impenetrable El Greco, whom his contemporaries at Toledo called "the visionary." In his magically coloured paintings he attempted to capture the ecstatic spirit of Spanish mysticism; and even to-day, despite their dreamy beauty, historians of art shake their heads in perplexity at the "wild grandeur and sublime detachment" which they display.<sup>56</sup> Greco's Saints display a strange, quite irrational feeling for life with their elongated forms and nervous appearances; and the complete surrender to the inner world which flows from them is their unique reality.

It was extremely difficult for Theresa, after experiences such as these, to return to the daily round of normal life. It is in the very nature of the ecstatic conversation that it cannot continue indefinitely in this earthly life, but must come to an end after a certain time. The highest happiness of the union with God, according to Theresa, can "never attain to complete perfection."<sup>57</sup> But the fearful feeling which remained with Theresa after conversing in this way was one of the most terrifying things which she had to endure. The ending of the ecstasy was to her like a cruel expulsion from Paradise, and she resumed her normal existence as though in exile. "Even on the following day I feel the pain in my pulses and in my whole body;

and it is as though all my limbs had been dislocated."<sup>58</sup> The state of high tension through which she had passed did not give way to merely spiritual weariness and depression. Her mortal life seemed to her, afterwards, as desolate and empty, joyless and dreary; and she spoke of the "gloomy comedy of life" which she had to begin again. After her foretaste of Heaven she longed to die, spoke of "sweet death," and wrote that strange song in which the thought

*For I do almost die of pain  
Because I cannot die yet*<sup>59</sup>

is varied in every way, and the great depth of its meaning can never be plumbed. Violent and moving sighs were wrung from her breast, and a consuming longing for another experience gnawed at her soul, even though she knew that an ecstatic union "is never given to a soul which yearns for it."<sup>60</sup> The highest thing on earth was unattainable without the subsequent pain, from which Theresa suffered grievously. The average Christian cannot divine the tearing anguish which beset her. It was something known only to the Saint who with her feet scarcely trod upon this Earth.

Nevertheless, the ecstatic experience leaves an abiding sense of ownership in the spirit. Theresa was first aware of this act of Grace when she realised that the consequent dreariness was a gift of God, and when she perceived that she must not resist it. It was then that she fully understood: "The highest degree of perfection is not manifested in inward consolations and sublime ecstasies, but only in such an identity of our own will with the will of God that we, with all our wills, may be able to comprehend all that we know to be His will, and so that we may learn to accept the bitter and the painful which His Majesty may ordain just as joyfully as we accept what is pleasant to us."<sup>61</sup> Nothing could be more mistaken than to regard this attitude as one of weary resignation; it has nothing in common with bitter renunciation. The unswerving identity with the Divine will is, rather, a gift which the soul receives in ecstasy. The seventh dwelling, of which Theresa speaks in her *Castillo Interior*, and which is the highest stage, consists of this "self-forgetting of the soul, so that it appears to have ceased to be; then is it completely transformed, so that it knows itself no longer. It does not remember that for it there is still a Heaven or a life or an Earth: its whole endeavour now is in the advancement of the honour of God."<sup>62</sup> All quarrels with destiny and all hopes that it will be changed disappear. The process of being free of all Creation—"When we are sad it means that we are not completely free of everything," Theresa wrote in one of her letters<sup>63</sup>—far surpassed all temporal joys. With her determination to see salvation only in identity with the will of God, Theresa was fundamentally anticipating Quietism in its truest sense. It was the super-rational peace of God in which she dwelt, a peace which she has described as the greatest joy which can be attained in this life, since in it the soul neither desires nor fears anything more. This state of spiritual suspension, triumphing over the world, was summed up by Theresa in the

contemplative lines which were found written on a slip of paper in her Breviary after her death—lines which cannot be repeated too often:

*Be not perplexed,  
Be not afraid,  
Everything passes,  
God does not change.  
Patience wins all things.  
He who has God lacks nothing:  
God alone suffices.*<sup>64</sup>

Is this whole experience, beginning with the commandment to consort only with Angels, up to the state of sublime union, just sheer imagination? Does not the account which Theresa gives of her ecstasy bear a striking resemblance to that of Dostoevski's "Idiot," whose epileptic fits "seemed to me like the height of harmony and beauty, awakening within me unsuspected feelings, a greatness, an abundance, and an eternity, which reconciled me to everything, as though I were in an inspired, God-seeing confluence with the very highest synthesis of life"?<sup>65</sup> A similar confusion is caused by Prince Myschkin, when he speaks of the indescribable light which filled him: "What does it matter that it is disease and immorality?"<sup>66</sup> Have these things really nothing to do with each other? Or is the question quite inadmissible? At any rate, it would not have offended Theresa herself, for side by side with her great religious gift she had a highly critical nature with a lively understanding of serious problems. But even though the Saint did not state the problem under discussion in modern terms, she had her own way of viewing it. She entertained grave doubts about herself and constantly wondered if she were not allowing herself to be deluded by her power of imagination. She knew all about false ecstasies and knew the reality of her own. With amazing psychological penetration she constantly observed herself, and subjected herself to a quite modern autoanalysis, which might easily have proved disastrous for her. The nun of Avila wanted to be certain that she was dealing with real ecstasies and not "just womanly swoons, such as do come over us, and which can easily be eliminated with sufficient food and sleep."<sup>67</sup> Moreover, in her lifetime, there lived in Spain one of the greatest impostors in this domain, who caused a great deal of comment. Theresa herself, however, recognised a rigid self-control as an essential duty; and she was very well acquainted with the sphinx-like character of the feminine spirit, writing in one of her letters: "Women are not so easily lost."<sup>68</sup> While women, moreover, are glad to leave their ecstatic experiences to the field of emotions, Theresa was imbued with an almost masculine need to subject them to an almost scientific analysis. And this must be noted as an instance of her incomparable courage. In her critical desire which reached as far as her innate feeling (a most noteworthy trait of Theresa's) she was disobedient to the Divine commandment to speak only with Angels and not with men, for she discussed her visions with her Father Confessor. This led to one of the most distressing chapters of her life.

Although in the life of most nuns the Father Confessor, as one of their last remaining links with the outside world, plays a great part, Theresa had no such unhealthy enthusiasm for her "spiritual lord." Indeed, she searched for a long time for a suitable confessor—and failed to find one! On the other hand, she was no easy spiritual charge, for she not only embarrassed her spiritual guide with complicated questions, but she was also able to tell him that she was able to receive more truth from a beam of light than if she had studied under the greatest theologians for a thousand years! With her intelligence she felt herself strongly attracted to men of learning from whom she could expect a greater depth of understanding than from the half-educated priests who were unable to understand the religious longing of her unusual spirit and were only liable to do her harm. Theresa suffered grievously under her confessors, who were incapable of understanding her visionary states, and who, not realising the greatness of her task, could not understand her spirit. The first man whom she told about her Great Conversation felt extremely ill at ease. Wearisome and long-drawn-out discussions ensued with other theologians, and their conclusions were crushing for Theresa. Her visions were qualified as the work of devils. Naturally this explanation had the effect of casting her down into the depths of spiritual distress. The instruction that she was to laugh at all such visions in the future as delusions of the Devil must have caused her unbearable anguish. Nevertheless, out of obedience to her Father Confessor, she complied with this order for a while. And as she changed from one Father to another, she found herself obliged to fight for the genuineness of her revelations for many years, which must surely have been one of the bitterest tasks of her life. A whispering campaign began against her, and she was charged with "wanting to be held as a Saint and to institute reforms when she has barely mastered the rules."<sup>69</sup> She found it hard that she was not understood by anyone in her immediate circle. That her dialogue with the Eternal could only be understood by men of intellect—not to be confused with the professional theologians—she herself did not realise at first. A real persecution was worked up against her, and Theresa stood quite alone. "Nor was there any man to whom I could turn, for they were all against me."<sup>70</sup> Only her inner knowledge enabled her to remain steadfast, and the perception that she could never renounce her Great Conversation without losing her soul. Theresa's was one of those heroic souls which are ready and willing to do battle with the whole of Hell. Only when she came to know a Franciscan, Peter of Alcántara, was her burden first alleviated, for he believed her ecstasies to be Divine illumination. Then a Dominican, Louis Bertram, supported this interpretation, and finally the Fathers of the Society of Jesus admitted that Theresa was not suffering from hallucinations of the Devil. Although the nun of Avila, up to this point, had suffered much pain and distress, her path of suffering was not without its good points. For her visions had had to undergo the most severe and critical of tests. They were not accepted at once by the Church with naive credulity: they were obliged to demonstrate their genuineness incontrovertibly.

In circumstances no less difficult than the objections provided by her spiritual counsellors, Theresa was successful in her attempts to explain her Great Conversation. She often undertook the hazardous task of explaining the various stages of prayer to the other Sisters. Now Theresa was possessed of an amazing psychological ability to express inward realities with the utmost clarity. With her innate acute perception she made a distinction between active and passive prayer, devoting her attention principally to the latter, which she divided into four stages: prayer of peace or tranquillity, that of union, that of ecstasy, and that of spiritual marriage. Again she described the soul's ascent in the image of her *castillo interior*, a spiritual fortress in which there are many dwellings, through which the praying soul must pass; or else she would use the simile of watering a garden, which can be done in many ways. But in spite of Theresa's great gift for dealing with mystical problems, even she was unable to explain the inexplicable. Her Great Conversation cannot be adequately expressed in the concepts of human speech, for it moves in different dimensions from those which are accessible to intellectual understanding. Theresa herself realised this when after countless attempts she understood the impossibility of putting into words the mystical approach to God: "It must be something which we shall never understand, as long as we live on Earth."<sup>71</sup>

In spite of the fact that we cannot know what it was that went on inside Theresa, her moving attempts to explain it have borne wonderful fruit, which posterity cannot treasure too highly. These are her writings which lie before us, free from the dust of centuries, and over which Time has passed without leaving a trace of his passage, as with Plato's *Dialogues*. The Saint of Avila wrote nearly everything at the bidding of her later confessors; and yet they still display a great sense of immediacy. The beautiful language of the manuscripts, covered with her firm, steady writing, has at all times been justly celebrated. Even in translation her words are a joy to read, and must take a worthy place beside the greatest writings of Christendom. And yet, as she herself complains, all her works were written in great haste, and, at the same time, she had her normal religious duties to fulfil, just like the other nuns. The Saint had to fight to find time for her writing, and she was often interrupted at her labours. She was never able to read through, let alone polish up, what she had written. It is by bearing in mind this method of working, and her constant state of suffering, that the shortcomings of her writings are to be viewed; for most of them are in a state of disorder, which tells us a great deal. The thread of the narrative is often lost, and Theresa will suddenly interrupt her account with the complaint: "I have strayed far from the subject."<sup>72</sup> But these slight deficiencies are more than offset by the brilliance of her work. We may say of Theresa's writings, moreover, that they all form one vast confession. This opinion is borne out not only by her *Autobiography*, which she wrote partly in a state of ecstasy, but also by her *Seven Dwellings*, and her *Way of Perfection*.<sup>73</sup> Serious-minded men have regarded these books as "holy writings,"<sup>74</sup> and Theresa herself felt that she was inspired when she

wrote.<sup>75</sup> Nothing flowed from her pen which she had not herself experienced and by which she had not been profoundly moved. And this experience revolved unceasingly round her Great Conversation. At all times she wrote factually, and the honour of being called "*doctor mystica*" was singularly appropriate. A fundamental feature of her vital style in writing was an in-no-way-officious tendency to help the reader on his way, and not merely to entertain him. Herein lies the greatest profit which we may derive from the reading of her works. They were written with Theresa's life-blood. Yet even with their immortal significance they do not apply to the broad masses—even in Theresa's lifetime, the servant of Princess Eboli laughed at her autobiography, in their inability to understand it—rather are they designed for humans who strive after perfection. Such people receive abundant precepts from her writings. The reader to whom their secret has been revealed gives to Theresa's works a place of honour on his bookshelves. The ultimate goal to which they tend lies in goading men on to greater love: "Only would I remind you that in order to go further on this way and to reach the longed for dwellings it is of no avail that we should think much, but that we should love much; so must you do what will rouse you to greater love. Perhaps we do not know what loving is, nor would I wonder at this: for love does not consist in the blissful feelings of devoutness, but in the steadfast resolve to want to please God in all things."<sup>76</sup>

What amazes one again and again in Theresa's writings is the prodigious knowledge they display of inward, spiritual truth. What this nun, with her mysterious depth of feeling, was able to say about the human soul borders almost on the Utopian. The terrestrial vault was as apparent to her as the stages by which she could mount on high. She knew every aspect of the soul, and also knew that "many souls come to grief because they would fly before God has given them wings."<sup>77</sup> She held it important that "the soul must not be regarded as something enclosed in a narrow space, but rather as an inner world, which contains so many and such splendid dwellings."<sup>78</sup> She recommended her fellow Sisters "that, concerning the soul, to think only of abundance, and breadth, and greatness; nor is this in any way exaggerated, for the soul is able to grasp far more than we are able to think."<sup>79</sup> Theresa was a distinguished expert on the human soul, since she constantly observed her own. She was acquainted as few mortals have been with spiritual virtue, and she knew what it meant to lose this or to develop it. She was indefatigable in her endeavour to make out of chaos an image of the soul beautiful, in the conception of which she embodied nothing which did not spring from herself.<sup>80</sup> Unfortunately, this expression, ever since Goethe's ingenious use of it in *Poetry and Truth*, has been all too freely employed, and thus it has lost much of its lustre. Although the cultivation of the loving spirit may occasionally have enjoyed a certain amount of undesirable feminism, in the case of Theresa we find no undue emasculation of the soul. Inward beauty is a significant desire, and was deeply rooted in neoplatonism. Even though Theresa herself was not aware of it her radiant spiritual beauty sprang from this source. In neoplatonism

Christianity also there is realised a profoundly Divine longing based on the conception of absolute, almost soul-born, beauty. The ideal of a beautiful soul is to be considered as the expression of the purest form of the yearning for beauty, and with its unfathomable spirituality it far surpasses external beauty. In the face of imperishable spiritual beauty mere externals fade into nothingness. If in the future men will come to realise the futility of this emptiness, then the beautiful soul, with its eternal secret renewed once more, will be able to exercise again its irresistible power of attraction.

#### IV

The Spanish mystic's ecstatic experiences alone would be sufficient to justify her being called the "great Theresa." And yet we do not come to know this Saint completely if we are familiar only with her visionary conditions. Surprisingly enough there was another side to Theresa which, at first sight, would appear to have little connection with her mystical life of prayer, and yet it must be regarded as a result of her Great Conversation. This new side of her assumed such proportions in the third phase of Theresa's life that it soon succeeded in completing the picture of this greatest of all Spanish women. Owing to the new development her life was driven into yet another course, which brought to an issue all the wealth of her talents. Christian history is familiar with many mystics who have submerged themselves in God. They are the salt who have preserved the Church from corruption. But although the Nun of Avila was one of them this does not mean that we find in her that egotistical enjoyment in self, which is indifferent to ethics and one of the patterns of mysticism. As Theresa understood it the meaning of prayer was to produce deeds, and her practical activity is one of the fruits of her dialogue with God. It was in her ecstasy, and nowhere else, that she undertook the task to which she devoted all her energies during the last period of her life.

The deeds to which Theresa saw herself called had to do with her fellow men. Theresa's burning love of God would not have been genuine if it had not been linked to loving her neighbours. According to the conviction of this Saint, the more man learns to love his neighbour the more is he filled with a love of God. "Therefore if you see that you are able to bring comfort to a sick woman, do not hesitate to forego your religious devotions in order to bring her this comfort. Give her your compassion and take part in her pain; and if you have to deny yourself food that she may eat, do it not as though it were for her sake, but rather because, as you do know, it is the will of the Lord."<sup>81</sup> Her visionary ecstasies did not at all make Theresa useless to the outside world. The great mystic of Spain did not stare so fixedly at Heaven that her eyes could light on nothing else. Side by side with her mysticism she enjoyed an exceptionally practical nature, which developed abundantly in the material tasks of life. She possessed a remarkable gift for organisation, which is found all too rarely among women, and which was denied, moreover, to St. Francis. Theresa was able, however, to unite them both together, mysticism and organisation. In other cases the

one is usually to be found to the exclusion of the other, but in Theresa the contemplative life and the active life dwelt together in harmonious accord. These highly differentiated gifts of hers in no way conflicted with each other, but were welded into an organic whole. "Believe me," she exclaimed, "Mary and Martha must stand side by side to receive the Lord into their house and to keep Him there, unless He is to be treated inhospitably and not regaled as does befit Him."<sup>82</sup> That she herself was able to unite these two personalities into one was the crown of her peculiar greatness. In this she resembles Catherine of Siena, who, side by side with her mystical contemplations, entered the Apostolate.

Naturally, in those times, the fact that she was a woman greatly hampered her burning desire for activity. Theresa keenly regretted that she was only a "weak little woman" instead of a man, who would have been able to fight more actively. Furthermore, she even counselled her Daughters to have no regard for womanliness, but rather to comport themselves as strong men. She herself had a brave spirit and was filled with saintly humility which in no way affected the warm maternal feelings which she always entertained for her nuns. Although she was thus imbued with pure femininity she felt herself called to act with vigorous energy. The saying of the Apostle that a woman should hold her peace in the community was of little use to Theresa's purposes. She overcame this obstacle by means of a vision in which God told her: "Tell them that they should not refer to only *one* of the utterances of the Holy Scriptures: they should look also upon the other places, if they would grasp My hand."<sup>83</sup>

What prohibited Theresa from leading the tranquil life of a nun in cloistered peace was the state of the times. Although she lived within the walls of a convent, she was not the kind of person to be unaware of the significant events of her century which were then being enacted. "The world is in flames," she said, and in these words admirably epitomised the sixteenth century.<sup>84</sup> She could not fail to notice the continual retrogression of Catholicism, and the steady advance of Protestantism. But the Spanish Saint was too far removed from the North to be able to obtain a proper conception of what the Reformation represented. She knew nothing of the spiritual struggles which Luther had sustained in his monastic cell. To her the word Lutheranism was merely a synonym for heresy, and towards it, as became a loyal "daughter of the Church" (as she called herself even on her deathbed) she naturally displayed the most violent antipathy and abhorrence. "It is as though they would condemn Christ over again, for a thousand false witnesses rise up against Him; but they will never destroy His Church."<sup>85</sup> This was the light in which Theresa regarded Protestantism. What she saw was the wild growth of heresy, the profanation of the Sacraments, and that a monstrous conflagration was consuming the whole of Christendom. But with her acute perception she realised that this heresy could never have reached such proportions, had there not been many grave flaws in the structure of Catholicism. Only because Catholics had been neglecting their religious duty had such a falling off been able to come about. "But the worst of it is that they give themselves out to be

friends of the Lord although secretly they betray Him, so that He can find scarcely anyone on whom He may rely."<sup>86</sup> The principal blame for the decline of the Catholic Church she attributed to the corruption of monastic discipline. "Oh dreadful evil, dreadful evil, when, in the Houses of the Orders—those of the men no less than those of the women—religious discipline is not observed; when in one convent there are two ways, the way of virtue and monastic discipline, and the way in which this discipline is relaxed, and when both ways are trodden simultaneously!"<sup>87</sup> Theresa was horrified at this state of affairs, and felt called to combat such a perilous situation. In her remarkable and almost sinister-sounding battle-song she cries out like a Sybil in the storm-tossed night of Christendom:

*Do not give yourselves to sleep,  
Ye who 'neath the Cross's banner  
For your God have chos'n to fight:  
It will bring no peace on Earth.*<sup>88</sup>

There is a crusading note about this fiery song, which, with its refrain that there is no peace on Earth, strikes one as a Spanish inversion of the Gospel.<sup>89</sup>

Like most true Christians Theresa felt the need to set to work on the house of God itself. It seemed to her that it was the duty of the nuns to make amends for the great decline of Christianity in the world. The Saint of Avila considered that it was out of place, at such a menacing time, to worry God with trivialities. For now the whole of life was at stake. Only a completely new and devout spirit in the monasteries and convents would be able to withstand the imminent disaster. "For what else could become of the world, if He were not to preserve it for the sake of the religious Orders?"<sup>90</sup> cried Theresa passionately. But if the religious Orders were to be able to fulfil their true purpose, they must first have a spiritual renovation. The internal front, which it is the principal duty of the Orders to protect, had to be fortified. According to Theresa's new plan the religious Houses should be immediately behind the battle zone, and to this high destiny she wished to lead the Carmelite convents, for the Carmelites had come to the western lands out of the east, but could as yet look back on no great tradition as the mendicant Orders could. It must have been the guidance of Providence which led Theresa to come to know a nun called Mary of Jesus, at Toledo. It was from her that she learned that the original Carmelite rules had been very different from those which were then being practised.<sup>91</sup> The meeting of these two nuns must have been the most important hour in Theresa's life, for as soon as she received the other's information, her mind was made up.

Without an instant's hesitation she plunged into the work of reforming the convents. The Order was to be led back to the observance of its original precepts and dogma, and thus the heroic zeal of the prophet Elijah, whom the nuns honoured as the founder of their community, would turn the scales once more. The original spirit of the convents, which had advocated uncompromising Christianity, was to be reaffirmed. The religious habits

were again to be made out of coarse material, nothing would be worn on the feet, fasts would be rigorously observed, and straw mattresses were to be used as sleeping-places. All mutual tenderness was strictly forbidden. No sooner had this woman come to her decision than, impelled by her indefatigable energy, she at once set about making it a reality. And she was singularly well suited to the task. Theresa had a rare aptitude for leadership. As one born to command, she had the gift of being able to associate in a friendly way with those who were under her authority, and yet still remained at a distance. "I do not believe that there is anything in the world so detrimental to a leader as when he is not feared."<sup>92</sup> She never believed that she was able to read everyone's heart, for this, according to her, only God can do. She was fully capable of dealing with nuns who fell a prey to melancholia, although her method may seem somewhat drastic to modern eyes.<sup>93</sup> When we read her treatise on *The Way and Manner of Visiting Convents*, we are constantly amazed at the essential realism of her ecstatic nature. She devoted as much careful attention to the account books as she did to the double grills on the door of the parlour, through which, in her view, a hand should not be able to reach. She concerned herself actively with everything, and nothing, however slight, escaped her sharp eyes. Moreover, she mastered financial transactions with exceptional ease—and what could provide a greater contrast to mysticism?—and exercised notable diplomacy, which never degenerated into secrecy. With resolute determination she did away with all the many visits paid to the convent, and led the Sisters back to their secluded way of life. All half-heartedness was prohibited and expunged from the daily religious routine. The convent had to become once again what it had been before, a sanctuary where the way of perfection could be truly followed. Theresa believed that only in this way could the lost respect of the world be regained. The number of the inhabitants of a convent was not to exceed thirteen, in order to preserve the true sense of communal life. The convents had to be either "completely poor, or with revenues such that the Sisters should not find themselves obliged to become a burden upon anyone for their livelihood."<sup>94</sup> The new goal hung continually before Theresa's eyes, and she would not be deflected from it. Once she had decided that a thing was right, she followed it through to the bitter end.

What is astonishing and sublime about all this is that Theresa's reforms in no way brought about a feeling of gloom. Theresa counselled her Sisters not to allow their souls, which should embrace the universe, to remain imprisoned in a corner of their convent-cells. She by no means rejected asceticism, but she set no great store by all too frequent flagellations. She did not approve of excessive penances which, for the most part, were the result of youthful exuberance. When Theresa took in hand the reformation of the convents she was already a mature, enlightened woman, who did not confuse earnestness with melancholy. She had long since overcome the dualism of her own early years in the convent, when she had been unable to unite God and the world. The decisive intuition had come upon her that "God is in all things,"<sup>95</sup> and the point of this, for Christians, was that

they should restore the proper relationship between God and the world. She bade her "weak little nuns" (as she herself once termed them) reflect on the fact that "the Lord, when you are busy in the kitchen, is beside you in the midst of the pots and pans";<sup>96</sup> and she opposed the keeping of spiritual diaries as a sheer waste of time. Although she herself delighted to converse with the Confessors who were versed in philosophy, she would not allow the Sisters to acquire merely a half-knowledge of theology. She frankly admitted that she knew no Latin, and did not even know who the Assyrians were. Theresa possessed a sincere feeling for nature, and her regard for the things of the field, the flowers and the streams served her as a book which brought her peace of mind. She viewed Creation with reverend awe, and believed "that even in the very smallest thing which God has created, even though it be no larger than an ant, there lies more concealed than a man does realise."<sup>97</sup> She expected the Sisters to share this attitude. Being the universal figure which she was, for God had enlarged Theresa's heart (as she many times asserted), she lived on the principle "of making ever greater decisions, since everything depends on this."<sup>98</sup> She would tolerate no grumbling or grouching in her convent. "God preserve me from sulky Saints," she said.<sup>99</sup> She herself was of a cheerful disposition and enjoyed a great sense of humour. With her infectious laughter she overcame more than one uncomfortable situation. When some Sisters were travelling to a place of refuge, they chanced to fall into evil company, and sought shelter with Theresa. "She, who had been deeply moved on hearing of our plight and how we had run away, now began to laugh heartily. This comforted us, for we had really believed that our last hour was come. She knew the emotions which the tumult had called forth in us, and how they tortured us. And in truth we were soon calm again."<sup>100</sup> Theresa's strength of will-power, as it is revealed in anecdotes of this nature, is no mere legendary exaggeration. The picture of a phenomenal woman, to whom nothing was too great and nothing too small, is to be discerned also in her innumerable letters where she expresses herself perfectly naturally, and in which her great-hearted personality dominates everything. Her letters, addressed to all kinds of people, touch on the most varied of matters without once being removed from that sense of the nearness of life which informs them all. They are not the sort of letters which were written with a view to their subsequent publication; they show Theresa as she really was, and not as she is so often depicted to-day. She quite candidly longed for some sugared orange-blossom, "cost what it may."<sup>101</sup> And what a spirit it was that could write this: "I have to laugh at myself to think that in return for all the confectionery, money and other gifts, I can only send you a penitential girdle!"<sup>102</sup> The Nun of Avila would show the same enthusiasm for long periods of fasting as she displayed for fried rashers of bacon, in which she delighted. When, during the course of a visit, her favourite dish was served to her, and on this account one of the lay Sisters made a disparaging observation that such a saintly person should indulge in such delights, Theresa laughed and gave her this splendid reply: "Rather should you praise the friendliness of your Lord,

and remember, when it is partridge, then eat partridge, and when you must fast, fast."<sup>103</sup> This ready answer is more than just a *bon mot*: it contains wisdom which we should undoubtedly seek to emulate. Only a woman of Theresa's spiritual stature could have made such a reply. She desired also that her Sisters should be gay and happy. "In the hours of recreation Theresa would take her tambourine, and dance and sing, and improvise verses, and her Daughters would take part with her in the singing and the dancing."<sup>104</sup> If it had been possible for us to have beheld the great Reformer of the Order at such a moment, the dancing Theresa must surely have provided us with a unique spectacle. One may perhaps be surprised to find such a joyful spirit reigning among the reformed convents of the Discalced Carmelites of Spain; and yet it was a saying of Theresa's that "all this is needful in order to be able to bear the burden of living."<sup>105</sup> She always strove to spread a pleasant atmosphere about her, and such an attitude is in no way a contradiction of her great Conversation. On the contrary, only a religious reformer who had had such a great experience could have behaved in such a way. By means of her synthesis of new earnestness and new joy she found the only possible way of setting the decadent life of the convents back on its true course. Joy alone would have been as inadequate as would earnestness alone. They both belong together, and together form the true Christian life; and it was the fact that the Carmelite Sisters really did practise this which gave rise to the declaration of the Protestant Tersteegen: "I freely admit that if the convents and monasteries had been as well ordered as those which Theresa established at the time of the Reformation, then nobody could have abolished them without causing a grievous affront to God."<sup>106</sup>

Theresa was not content, however, with leading her convents back to the old-established rules and discipline. She also felt the urge to found new establishments of the Order. Side by side with the convent reformer there was also the convent founder, who accomplished much great work in this field. In her book, *On the Founding of Convents*, she has given a clear description of this activity, and told of the great labour and toils involved in the process. These little convents did not spring up of their own accord all over Spain. They all had to be founded, and this entailed an enormous amount of considerations. Houses had to be bought and put into order, and it was necessary to raise the needful money, and to select the most suitable sort of people. Theresa's voluminous correspondence gives a slight idea of all the work which she had to do in this respect. Moreover, this was not the sort of thing which she could dictate from the tranquillity of her cell: she had to put her shoulder to the wheel herself. Hence it was necessary for her to travel from town to town, to inspect buildings, and to make all the requisite arrangements herself. In a closed-in carriage, accompanied by two Sisters—not unlike a travelling convent—Theresa, all the year round, went hither and thither, in scorching heat and freezing cold, traversing half Spain, and bringing convent after convent into existence. We must appreciate this concrete activity of hers, in order to assess her achievements correctly. The danger-fraught highways were in those

days in a most primitive state. The nuns frequently had to spend the night in dubious inns or in the open air. As a result of this Theresa must have bitterly rued her ill-health, for she often suffered from fevers, arthritis, and headaches. But she never lost her good humour, and in one of her letters she was able to write: "Indeed He did give us plenty of opportunities to suffer many things, but they were only plagues of fleas, hobgoblins, and the hardships of travel . . ." <sup>107</sup> Their mules could often make no headway, since everywhere a press of people sought to see them. Especially did men want to hear her speak, and often she could say nothing to them other than that they were worse than beasts and were trampling on the nobility of their souls. Uncomplainingly she took upon herself all the hazards of the journeys. And she was able to say of herself: "As far as I can remember, I have never abandoned my design to found a convent from fear of any difficulties, although towards journeys, especially those which were prolonged, I experienced the greatest repugnance." <sup>108</sup> She shunned no exertions, and even as an aging woman she continued indefatigable at her labours. She never lost herself in a round of pointless activity, however, for she recognised this as the enemy of the soul. We must remember that it was important and hard work which she was performing. And how much greater must our wonder be when we pause to reflect that all this was being done by a mystic, who also experienced the highest of ecstasies!

To be sure, Theresa, who, side by side with Loyola, was already regarded as the most powerful figure of the Counter-Reformation, was to experience a certain amount of unpleasantness. Both the reformation and the founding of convents came in for violent opposition. The Carmelite nuns, unwilling to forego their hours of gossiping in the parlour and their freedom to go out when they chose, endeavoured to frustrate Theresa's endeavours with every means at their disposal. And the most vigorous form of opposition arose when Theresa, with the help of John of the Cross, attempted also to reform the monasteries. At this time she was even less understood in Spain than Protestantism was. People spoke of her in terms which were otherwise applied only to Luther. Her opponents, who charged her with imparting instruction which they held to be suspect, were all orthodox Catholics. A grave struggle ensued within the Order, and Theresa had to suffer a flood of calumnies. The Papal Nuncio called her "a restless, wandering woman who, on the plea of pious works, delights in follies." <sup>109</sup> She was denounced to the Inquisition, who pored over her writings in an attempt to find impeachable passages, and who refused to release her for a long time. Theresa's assurance that she had always submitted her books to the Church proved to be no safeguard for her. The conflict waxed even greater when the Nuncio publicly declared himself opposed to the reformation of the convents. Theresa began to feel the full force of his displeasure. She was sentenced to be confined to a convent, and forbidden to found any more. From letters to her friends, with whom she could only correspond under an assumed name, we receive a vivid picture of the distress which her fellow Christians caused her. Not for nothing did she cry out, about Catholic Spain: "It is abominable how much injustice

is rife in this country of ours, how little truth and how much of falsehood!"<sup>110</sup> During the course of canonisation these regrettable events were euphemistically concealed in the statement that only by the enduring of persecution on the part of good men can the virtue of patience be established in its heroic quality. A weaker nature might well have gone under before these blows, but Theresa blanched before no menaces and fought on with real heroism. Against attempts made by the Inquisition to intimidate her, this woman proclaimed: "There is something of greatness in the certainty of knowledge and in freedom of the spirit."<sup>111</sup> For a year, Theresa had to suffer this grievous persecution. Her spiritual opponents fought with the most abominable weapons, and did not shrink from lying and cheating. But Theresa remained steadfast and unflinching, even when events took an inauspicious turn. She never deserted her upright conduct. "I wish you to know that I am not allowing these events to depress me. I know that God has willed them, and that His Majesty watches over them with greater care than we do."<sup>112</sup> She was almost glad that it was necessary to suffer for the sake of truth. Since she saw no solution to the problem, and her reforms were likely to meet with disaster, she summoned up her remaining courage, and risked writing to King Philip II, requesting him to intervene. This had an unexpected result. The King took her side at once, and the persecutions ceased immediately. Theresa was to live to see how her work, instead of being destroyed, was carried even further, even though it could not now arrest the progress of the times. But she has won the fame of having had the biggest share in the renovation of Catholicism at the time of the Counter-Reformation.

But to crown all, these disturbing struggles had completely undermined her strength. She fell ill, and was obliged to take to her bed. When she realised the course which her illness was taking she rejoiced greatly and said: "So it is come at last, the so often and so hotly longed for hour, O my Lord and Bridegroom! So is it now time for us to see each other at last."<sup>113</sup> According to her fellow Sisters, Theresa did not succumb to any normal illness: it was "the inextinguishable flame of Divine love which caused her death."<sup>114</sup> This description reveals yet again the atmosphere which surrounded her. And in truth, Theresa was no ordinary nun. There was something of the Cherub in her, whose flaming radiance cannot be fully grasped, and at whose glance one begins to tremble with awe.

## John of the Cross

1542—1591

### I

JOHN OF THE CROSS was once conversing with Theresa of Jesus about the Holy Trinity. In the midst of the conversation he suddenly felt that his soul was filled with the Divine breath. He attempted to hold on to his chair, but the power of the ecstasy was too great, and he rose into the air together with the chair. At the same time Theresa, too, was overcome by an ecstasy, and she also arose, on the other side of the latticed screen, kneeling on the air. A nun, passing by chance, was dumbfounded at the miraculous event, which may well be described as the most unusual meeting between two human beings in the whole of Christian literature.

In the face of such a fantastic business a man must needs shake his head; for it asks too much of the modern spectator. What kind of a man was this, of whom such reports are handed down to posterity? Whoever would seek the answer to this question must bear in mind that John of the Cross really is one of the most unapproachable figures in Christian history. To be true, in 1926 at Rome, he was raised to the position of Teacher of the whole Church, a dignity conferred on only a few Saints. But, at the same time, John of the Cross remains inaccessible. Even the beautiful five-volume edition which appeared in the German language after the first World War was incapable of making him appeal to the educated, let alone establish his popularity. The name of John of the Cross is certainly frequently mentioned, and always with that respect which is his due; but what happens in his case is the same thing that Lessing wrote of himself, that he wished he had been praised less and read more. There are not many people who have read through all his writings. This is quite understandable, for there is nothing of the fashionable mystic about him. John of the Cross was of a reserved, almost taciturn nature, which it is not easy to understand. He never comes to meet us half-way, rather does he appear to rebuff us. The air of secret mysteries swirls about him, and the inaccessible quality in him is an essential part of his natural character; and this is his peculiar charm. Any account of him which ignores this aspect must necessarily destroy part of the essential man. In order to break through the barrier of his reserve we must first conquer him spiritually, a feat which few, so far, have been able to achieve.

Some slight assistance along this way is to be found in the fact that

John of the Cross was a contemporary of the Spanish Conquistadores. He lived in the century which followed upon Columbus' discovery of America, a period celebrated for the conquest of Mexico and Peru. The men who crossed the ocean were bold, adventurous spirits, who sought to open up a new part of the earth for the profit of their country; and their feat is still one of the greatest achievements of Spain. By means of their expeditions these men opened a new chapter in the history of the world, which has had far-reaching results. And it is as a parallel phenomenon, as a spiritual Conquistador, that we must regard John of the Cross. His voyage of discovery was not through the realms of outward space: it was enacted in the kingdom of the soul. But he too advanced into unknown territory, and his discoveries are in no way inferior to those of the Conquistadores. It is singularly appropriate to compare the two explorations with each other, for while the one's objective was an outward goal, the other greatly expanded the inward, spiritual life. The man who is ready to follow John of the Cross is embarking on the greatest voyage of discovery which is to be found in human life, and will encounter many inexplicable surprises on his way.

## II

The family of Juan de Yepes was completely poor, so much so that the boy, at an early age, was set to learn some trade so as to be able to contribute towards maintaining the household. But despite his willingness, the youngster was soon found by his first master to be quite useless. Although attempts were made to make a joiner, a tailor, a builder, and a painter of him, all the instruction he was given foundered on the boy's incapacity. However diligently he applied himself to his tasks, he was unable to do his work to the satisfaction of his teacher. To his mother's great distress he was dismissed from his employment over and over again. On account of its ingloriousness this fact has been only cursorily noted by most of his biographers. This is a mistake, for it can tell us a great deal. The unswerving nature of the youthful John cannot be attributed solely to his manual ineptitude: the basic reasons lie far deeper down. The dreamy youth was in no way suited for a life of manual labour, nor would it have been possible to have made a skilled craftsman out of him, since his spiritual nature did not belong at all to the busy life of the world. His curious spiritual condition was already driving him along a path which cut right across his family's way of life, and it soon made its influence felt as a troublesome factor in which, unconsciously, he militated against the yoke of having to earn his livelihood. Instead of hushing up this fact as something shameful, it deserves to be noted right at the beginning, since it provides the earliest sign of his unique character, and makes it impossible to place him in the category of normal mortals.

The distracted mother had no option but to hand the fourteen-year-old youth over to a hospital, where he could only be employed for collecting alms. For the family this was the obvious way of ridding themselves of

the useless lad in the most inconspicuous way. From the hospital this youth, so ill-suited to normal life, found his way, a few years later, into the Order of the Carmelites. The entering of a monastery was in no way unusual in Spain in those days. Countless men were constantly entering the religious Orders. The young man's intellectual gifts were soon recognised by his Order, and he was despatched forthwith to the University of Salamanca. The names of the teachers who exercised an influence on his studies are not known, but he certainly acquired a remarkable knowledge of theology and philosophy. With notable zeal he read the writings of Dionysius Areopagita and the Early Fathers. This predilection reveals not only his intellectual inclinations but also the sources on which the young monk's later mysticism was nourished. He also possessed a phenomenal mastery of the Bible whereof he was later to give countless proofs. The completion of his studies was marked by his ordination as a priest. Although the priestly career was the proper answer to his inner desires John was far from happy in his monastery. To be sure, he had no longing whatsoever to go back into the world; but the negligent conduct of monastic life troubled him greatly. In the middle of the sixteenth century the Spanish monasteries were in a corrupt state, which manifested itself principally in an exceedingly commodious interpretation of the monastic rules. By the comfortable way of life, which the monks who had ostensibly given up the outer world brought with them into the cloistered walls, John felt utterly disgusted. A sense of bitter disillusionment swept through him as is usually the case with noble natures who enter a monastery with the highest expectations, and find inside it only another form of everyday life. In order to overcome this feeling he brooded on the desirability of transferring from the Carmelites to the Carthusians, whose much stricter rules were, he thought, much better suited to his ascetic zeal.

It was at this time of spiritual crisis that John had his unexpected meeting with Theresa of Jesus, an encounter which was of the very greatest importance to the twenty-five-year-old monk. Two human beings thus came face to face, who were, individually, completely different from one another. Theresa, with her vitality and her passionate temperament, was a typical Spanish woman, and had had to fight hard to enable her Saintly qualities to win through, while John, with his sickly constitution and tendency to penitence was almost entirely introspective. In him, apart from his features, the national characteristics were but ill-represented. At this time Theresa had long since passed through her crisis, while John stood on the threshold of the great change in his life. The convent-founder knew perfectly well what she wanted, and at the moment she was pre-occupied with her project of carrying the reform which she had begun into the Carmelite monasteries as well. She was thus on the lookout for a suitable Father to assist her in the task; and she had been told about John. She desired to see the young man, and was delighted with him, although not with his outward appearance. It has been noted, however, that "his expression is serious and reverend, his complexion dark brown, and his

features attractive."<sup>1</sup> On Theresa John's physical appearance left, rather, an impression of insignificance. In her usual amusing way she later said that she had begun her reform with "one-and-a-half religious people," since, on account of his small stature, she counted John as only "half a man." What the author of the *Castillo Interior* seized upon in John was his spiritual attitude, which, with her shrewd sagacity, she at once saw to be akin to her own. For John it was one of the greatest strokes of good fortune in his life that at a comparatively early age he should encounter the decisive person of his career, one who already embodied his being, after whom he sought, and whose religious make-up was fully the equivalent of his own.

After this first meeting there grew up between the two a spiritual friendship which was of the greatest importance to them both. Although their relationship could only be conducted through the grill of the parlour, they drew steadily nearer to each other, and with their religious ardour, inspired each other mutually. The nature of this relationship has usually been viewed in the wrong light, since John has always been pushed into the shade, as it were, by Theresa. Yet John's subordination to the other should not be overstressed. It was not the mere relationship of learner to teacher which bound John to Theresa. Naturally John was much stimulated by Theresa, with her greater age and experience; and his profound respect for her is to be found in the one and only reference to "the wonderful writings of Theresa" which is to be found in his works.<sup>2</sup> But John, of course, was pondering upon his own problem, and his friendly interchange of views with Theresa did not prevent him from finding his own true self. Thanks to his theological training he was superior to Theresa in many questions, and was in a position to give as well as to receive. Theresa has expressly noted: "He was so pious that I was able to learn more from him than he from me."<sup>3</sup> And she once asserted that everything which the scholars told her she could find out from her "little Seneca," as she was wont to call John. She regarded him as Divinely inspired, and called him "in truth the father of my soul," which was appropriate since it was he who "has most encouraged my soul."<sup>4</sup> In her memorable letter to Philip II Theresa had dared, even in John's lifetime, to refer to him expressly as a "Saint."<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately the full depths of this rare spiritual friendship will never be known, for the exchange of letters between Theresa and John has been lost in oblivion. Their relationship was at all times quite unclouded, since, in confronting each other, each saw through the other, and yet, at the same time, each was completely self-reliant. In the thing for which they fought they were of one and the same mind. In comparing them with Master Eckhart and his School their Mysticism offers the greatest possible similarity, for their experience was fundamentally the same.

When, for the first time, Theresa beheld John through the parlour grill, she at once realised that he must be used for the reformation of the Discalced Carmelites. To achieve this purpose she did not have to overcome great opposition nor to exercise great powers of persuasion. Her

plans fitted in perfectly with John's own feelings, and consequently he was at one with her arrangements. After his conversation with Theresa he realised that it was unnecessary for him to change from the Carmelites to the Carthusians in order to lead a more rigorous life. He had the opportunity of carrying out the same purpose within his own order. With the ardent zeal of which his spirit was so full, John threw himself into his new task.

In Duruelo he founded the first monastery of the Discalced Carmelites, in which the original intentions of the Founder of the Order were put into practice, with the exception of ascetic penances. A tumble-down house through which the wind blew and the rain swept was acquired for this purpose. It was in such a state of dilapidation that no one could be expected to take up their residence in such a pigsty. But it was precisely this utter poverty which attracted John irresistibly. Where there had been a barn John raised up a church. On the walls he hung crosses made out of pieces of building timber, and drew skulls on the cemetery walls. This was all the decoration which there was. Every comfort was rigidly excluded. A stone served as pillow and a straw mattress was the only other requirement needed for the hours of sleep, which were reduced to a minimum. Bread and water formed the diet, which on rare occasions included vegetables. Complete quietness and isolation from the world were to become a reality. These monks accepted the most severe hardships and their rule of life was summed up in the truly terrifying motto: suffer and then die. When John founded this little monastery he dropped his family name of Yepes, and, following the example of Theresa, took a spiritual name by which he was thenceforth known: John of the Cross.

It would be too innocent to associate John of the Cross's sojourn in the monastery at Duruelo purely with the title of reformation. And should we tend to do so, it is salutary to recollect Kierkegaard's statement that the sign of the true reformer is to make the thing more difficult, not easier. With John of the Cross the desire to reform was not restricted to altering habit and building. He strove to renew the spirit. And when we regard this new spirit more closely we are almost frightened. He sought to summon up nothing less than the religiously significant Spirit of the Wilderness. He sought to awaken that Spirit which had bade John the Baptist feed on locusts, and which dwelt also in the early Christian Fathers. His knowledge of their writings bore fruit in maturity. At the very summit of Spain's cultural glory John of the Cross chose to embrace the principles of the earliest Cenobites. He practised their lofty ideals with a humility which could spring only from a genuinely religious nature. Out of his first creation John of the Cross was able to waft to one the hot breath of the Wilderness, which, with its fire, threatened to consume everything. Something of the ancient spirit of Jehovah, which drove Elijah into the Wilderness, seethes through these heroic beginnings. This is Spanish holiness; and whoever would learn of the religiousness of the age of Philip II, must also seek to understand these events. The significance of the first period of the life of John of the Cross lies in his renewal of the

sinister piety of the Wilderness, which, with its ascetic discipline, sets out the essential hypothesis for the ascent of the soul. We will be wrong if we do not acknowledge the greatness of this undertaking merely because it appears strange to the modern mind.

This unique spectacle made a profound impression on a large number of John's contemporaries, and it was not long before he was joined by others of the same way of thinking, with whom he strove towards his goal. John of the Cross was the guiding personality, whom the newcomers followed as their leader. His talent for spiritual leadership is apparent in his dispositions regarding monastic life, which illuminated the new Wilderness ideal from within; and his spiritual watchword, "sooner die and perish than sin," belongs to the very highest sphere of religiousness. It cannot be translated into the language of normal Christianity and is addressed, moreover, only to those mortals who have closed the doors of the world behind them and have gone out into the Wilderness. Chiefly is one bewildered by John of the Cross's dispositions because they appear to consist of contradictory statements. His *Instructions for the Members of the Order* presents the monks with the paradoxical admonition "to love and to forget men."<sup>6</sup> The monastery founder of Duruelo expected them neither to take offence nor to marvel at the way of life of other monks, but "at the good which the others do perform, and to rejoice as though they themselves had done it."<sup>7</sup> With regard to the close communal life of the cloister which can so easily give rise to friction John of the Cross gave this ruling: "Condemn not a man for a lack of virtues which you do deem to be apparent in him; perhaps he is highly pleasing to God for reasons whereof you do not think."<sup>8</sup> And whatever should befall the monks, whether it were good or ill, they had to accept it without a murmur since it came from God. Above all did he inculcate into them this principle: "Never do anything, nor say any word which Christ would not do or say were He in your place and of your years and health."<sup>9</sup> All the dispositions of John of the Cross were aimed at the work of improvement which would be of use to the new monastic life. The Wilderness ideal of this Saint is plainly evident in his superhuman article of faith: "Desire nothing but the Cross, even when it brings no comfort; for this is perfection."<sup>10</sup> Prodigious spiritual exertions are required of the human who would strive to attain the ideal of holiness. John of the Cross's spiritual guidance is never based on self-evident truths. It reveals unfathomable depths to the man who meditates on it. "Forego your desires, and you will receive what your heart covets,"<sup>11</sup> is surely one of the most unusual counsels which a man can give, and yet it implies the ability to bring to maturity the most unexpected fruits. The secret of this monkish Wilderness theology becomes apparent to us if we do not read his sublime maxims in swift succession, but subject each one separately to a penetrating scrutiny. The rapturous power which springs from his heroic words was based in the new personality of John of the Cross himself, who embodied the new ideal in his own person.

That it really was the ancient Spirit of the Wilderness which flared up

again in John is proved by the result he was able to bring about throughout the whole Carmelite Order. In the Spain of those days, with its refined ways and manners, men were already too far removed from the old monasticism to avoid feeling a great aversion to this revival of the Wilderness ideal. All the monks who, up till then, had adhered to a commodious interpretation of the rules of the Order must have been dumbfounded at John's endeavours. To them his radicalism signified a constant reproof, and they therefore determined to oppose his reforms, and sought to have them represented as impracticable extravagances. Between the Calced and the Discalced Carmelites there arose the sort of violent controversy which invariably occurs when fundamental truths are at stake. We should not wonder at this strife, for it was inevitable. The old Order could invoke the right of custom, and felt that it was menaced by the new piety. An elementary hatred was aroused against the founder of the new movement. The Calced Carmelites put themselves in the wrong at once by the reprehensible means with which they attacked the new Order. Since they were far inferior to the Discalced Carmelites in religious virtue, they attempted to offset this disadvantage by means of intrigues. In the end they comported themselves in a way which was an insult to all Christian love and charity. Against the young reform they unleashed a veritable storm, in which they gave full vent to the most unpleasant qualities of monkishness. No calumny, no slander was too foul for them provided it would help to undermine the work of John of the Cross. Whatever human malice could devise they turned against him.

John of the Cross, as the Father of the movement for monastic reform, had to suffer all their furious attacks himself. He was represented as a conspirator to overthrow the whole Order. Since his opponents were unable to get at him, he was suddenly attacked by armed men on a December night in the year 1577. They easily broke down the door of his cell, bound him, and carried him off by force. The bailiffs, who had thus summarily borne him away, took him to Toledo, where he was thrown into prison.

The grievous suffering which his imprisonment was to mean to him began with the compulsory wearing of the shoes and clothing of the old observance. He was shut up in a narrow, evil-smelling cell which was devoid of any light, and in which he could scarcely stand upright. In order to break down his stubbornness he was treated with extraordinary brutality. In the spiritual sense he was tormented in every conceivable way, and the most frightful rumours were whispered just outside the door of his cell—for instance that the Pope had expressly repudiated Theresa's reforms. Throughout his period in prison he was refused Communion, and nobody was allowed to visit him. "The prior called him a rebel and an impostor, and an overweening man who sought to win fame as a reformer of the Order."<sup>12</sup> Not content with the revilings which he had to bear from his gaolers, he was also obliged to suffer corporal punishment. His clothing was never changed and he was scarcely able to fight off the attacks of the vermin. He was given only tainted food to eat, which, moreover, was

highly seasoned, and all drink was denied him. As a consequence of this, loss of appetite and sleep set in and his strength noticeably declined. He became so weak that he could barely walk. The monks kicked him with their feet, and every Wednesday and Friday he was scourged with a rod in the presence of the whole community. The traces of this ill-treatment remained on his body till his dying day. The most frightful tortures were devised for the Saint during his own lifetime by the Brethren of his own Order. Theresa was so incensed by these brutal chastisements that, in a letter to Philip II, she "held that it would have been better if he had fallen into the hands of the Moors, for at least they might have shown him more compassion."<sup>13</sup> This diabolical cruelty within the Church is one of those frightening things which we encounter more than once in the world of the Saints, and which provides us with an extraordinarily difficult riddle to solve. "I cannot imagine how God can permit such a thing," lamented Theresa in regard to the imprisonment of John of the Cross, which must indeed have been the constant subject of her thoughts.<sup>14</sup> Yet in spite of the incomprehensibility of it, it is necessary to view the malicious wickedness in its proper proportions. Only then can we be free from any false colouring, and only then does the picture of the Saint stand forth in its prodigious greatness.

The English Archbishop, Alban Goodier, believes that he has found the reason, in this shameful treatment, why there is no outstanding modern biography of John of the Cross. The author of such a life would necessarily have to permit a heavy shadow to be cast on the Catholics, which no one would willingly do.<sup>15</sup> The forthright Johannes Mumbauer, however, despite his priesthood, noted that "this scandalous conduct, which might have been taken from some novel, served as a terrifying example for the pharisaical fanatics of all times both within and without the Church, and should be examined in greater detail."<sup>16</sup> It would, of course, be easy to build up a flaming indictment out of this inexcusable conduct of the Carmelites, but one must not allow oneself to be tempted into such a course. To do so would be to follow a path which John of the Cross would never have followed, and which leads only to a superficial conclusion. Rather should we look deeper and see what underlay this terrible suffering, and discover what was the good of it.

### III

In spite of the gloom of his wearisome months in prison at Toledo, John's imprisonment must be regarded, after his meeting with Theresa, as the second decisive event of his life. Its importance can hardly be overstated. Moreover, John was able to speak of "Toledo in the storm," as El Greco had done in his powerful painting; only in the case of the Saint it was an internal storm which was played out in the dark brilliance of his soul and during the course of which hours of being completely forsaken by God alternated with hours of being illuminated by His sublime Grace. He was thrust down into those depths which either

destroy or exalt a man. We can only guess at what went on in the soul of John of the Cross during these months. During the hours of martyrdom which he suffered within the narrow walls of his prison, the great mystic poet was born within him. When he found himself deprived of all human consolation, when no one could spare him a single word of kindness, when he felt himself as deserted as only a soul in utter solitude can feel itself forgotten, when the dark shades of melancholy threatened to cast down his enduring courage, and when doubts at last began to beset him—then did there break forth from his anguished heart the first sweet tones of the poet. In the extremity of his distress there was a God, Who gave him the power to say what he endured. Rarely has such a dark situation given rise to such radiant joy. Like “to a blinded nightingale in a narrow cage” he poured forth his song of imperishable beauty.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the prisoner had not even a pen to hand with which to write down the eternal song which suddenly came to his lips. The wondrous lament which he continually repeated arose out of his very soul, and could only originate *in carcere et vinculis*:

*Where didst thou hide thyself,  
Belovèd, and didst leave me here lamenting?  
Like the deer didst thou flee,  
Leaving me sorely wounded;  
Shouting did I pursue thee: thou wert gone.*<sup>18</sup>

It is an amazing reflection to think that the man who sought to establish the spirit of the wilderness in the Order of the Carmelites should also have been a poet. From the very nature of his harsh asceticism we would have expected a blunt rejection of all poetry. Equally surprising is it that in John of the Cross, who at Duruelo would only suffer skulls and crucifixes, an artist was later revealed. Certainly nobody would think to find in him a sympathetic lover of music; but John of the Cross, like most introspective persons, was a many-sided man, who cannot be classified in only one category. His poetry is in no way a contradiction of his ascetic ideals. The latter forms the hard outer shell which encloses the sweetness of the kernel. That the Saint of Fontiberos was a poet was remarked long ago; but the importance of this fact has not been properly assessed: the poetry has been regarded as a mere accompaniment instead of as the fundamental melody. It is necessary—quite the reverse of what has hitherto been done—to establish his poetry as the central factor of his existence. John of the Cross is a poet among Saints, and a Saint among poets; and his fundamental experience is that of a poet. Obviously he is not one of those poets whose principal delight lies in the telling of tales; rather is he, like Hölderlin, one of those who are “holy vessels,” who allow “God’s storm” to pass over them “bareheaded.” John of the Cross is an exceptionally religious poet to whom song was a holy act, and who felt himself to be a guardian of the holy flame. Herein lies the comfort which he brings and also his remoteness from us. The literary expert usually lacks the

religious quality which is necessary in order to be able to understand him, while religious men are often lacking in artistic appreciation. As the poet of mysticism, John of the Cross has left no voluminous collection of works behind him: only a few exquisite verses of enchanting beauty, of dark power and of brilliant perception testify to his art. The fact that he took refuge in poetry is no mere freak of chance. He knew intuitively that a holy soul should sing and not speak. Poetry is—apart from ecstasy—the only form high enough to experience the Divine spirit. Ordinary language is not enough; only through rhythm can exaltation be felt. The highest things can be expressed only in song as Mechtild von Magdeburg and Jacopone da Todi have already observed. What a note of yearning and longing does John of the Cross allow to ring through these lines:

*For all of beauty  
I'll ne'er be lost,  
Only for something  
By chance attained.*<sup>19</sup>

Our amazement at the poetry of John of the Cross increases when we turn our attention to the subject-matter. His magic verse contains a music of words which, with its sweet intoxication, can only be compared with the Song of Solomon. The same passionate fire which flames through Solomon's antiphony with the Shulamite, is to be found in John of the Cross. The Old Testament book, without being simply imitated, is restored again in "the literary landscape of the Song of Solomon, which is fused into the real, semi-Oriental landscape of Andalusia."<sup>20</sup> John of the Cross's mysterious outpouring of lyrical love springs entirely from the heart and overwhelms mankind with its Orphean might. The very nature of his poetry, burning as it does with love, reveals the purest degree of Bride-Mysticism. Only a prudish lack of understanding can take exception to his sensuous images, which give expression to the most spiritual form of human experience. Moreover the religious poet had scarcely any alternative other than the language of love when he had to show how the relationship of man to God is not a purely formal thing but something which springs from the exaltation of love, and that this alone implies the very closest union with God. Eros, as the only adequate means of recognising the Divine, enabled John of the Cross to treasure the impassioned Song of Solomon as one of the most profound books of the Bible. The symbolic language of love of this Old Testament book reached out to the poet of mysticism as the true interpretation of God, and this conviction enabled him, too, to sing:

*Upon my flowering breast,  
Which whole I did preserve for Him alone,  
There did He lie asleep,  
And I to Him did cleave,  
And the cedar trees did fan the quiet air.*

*The breeze from the battlements,  
As I His tresses cherished one by one,  
With its gentle hand serene,  
Upon my neck did strike,  
And did suspend my senses with its touch.*

*I stayed, forgot myself,  
And leaned my face upon my dear Belovèd,  
All stopped, I left myself,  
And left there all my cares,  
All quite forgotten 'mid the lily flowers.<sup>21</sup>*

Like all poems, of course, those of John of the Cross obviously lose their beauty of form in translation. But even in translation we may discern something of their magic and their exaltation.

Since the poems of John of the Cross deal with God and not with man they are not easy to understand. They are not readily intelligible, grammatically, nor is it easy to wrest their secret from them. Like Rilke's *Duineser Elegien* they can only, in the last analysis, be felt. John of the Cross's songs were composed in moments of mysticism, and to understand them they require of the reader, as he himself knew, the ability to put himself in the same state. Even in his own lifetime complaints about the difficulty and obscurity of his poetry were frequent. The Prioress Anna of Jesus asked him to explain his *Spiritual Song*, which he had written in prison, and gave him no peace until he set himself to the task. After prolonged hesitation he adopted the suggestion, and began to write commentaries on his poems. These did not take the form of a brief guide on how to read them; his commentaries were full-length essays, with a painstaking interpretation of the poems line by line. This may seem, in the first instance, to be a strange task, since a poem should be able to speak for itself, and if it does not do this it appears that it cannot be genuine art. And yet it is precisely from the artistic and not the material point of view that this work must be considered. In reproof of John's undertaking to write his commentaries it has been suggested that the monk in him, inimical to the world, triumphed again and destroyed the wonderful music of his poems with allegorical explanations. But this view does not fit into the complicated circumstances, and a true appreciation of the relationship of commentary to poem is the touchstone for a real understanding of John of the Cross himself. His poems are religious lyrics which belong to the world of mysticism, and they provide only an imperfect expression of what he experienced in a state of ecstasy. They merely symbolise the reality which lies behind them. If John of the Cross now yielded to the requests for clarification and set to work on his commentaries, which he wrote without consulting any books, and which, one after the other, grew into enormous volumes, they were very different commentaries from those which we usually encounter. With the tedious elucidations and paraphrases which small-minded people delight in

making of the works of the great masters these commentaries have no connection whatsoever. The Saint was not interested in the writings of linguistic treatises. John of the Cross was guilty of no sacrilege in respect of his splendid poems. The prose discourses which he wrote for his poetry sprang from the same mystical atmosphere and go back to the same experience as the poems themselves. The only difference is the form of them. They completely nip in the bud any suspicion that the pure love lyrics of John of the Cross merely give expression to thinly veiled sexual emotions. The commentaries show clearly that the poems are images from love which, intended for purposes of comparison, attempt to illustrate the inmost spiritual nature of man's relationship to God. The poems and commentaries of John of the Cross belong together, and should not be separated from each other. The poems were written by a mystic; and in the commentaries the poet is ever present.

His prose discourses, moreover, may be numbered among the most unusual works in world literature. The virile clarity in the lucid composition of the chapters and the majestic language of the Spanish baroque style have already been praised by countless critics; and yet, all the same, they are extremely difficult to read. John of the Cross never offers his hand to the reader and makes no sort of effort to win his favour. Quite the reverse, for it is as though he intentionally hid his pearls away from curious eyes. His writings may be likened to a fortress with all the draw-bridges raised. Any one who merely glances cursorily through these writings in the hope of chancing upon some flash of spiritual illumination, will soon put them down again in disappointment. "No moral or aesthetic treatises will be offered here to those literary gentlemen who would attain to God only by following a path of roses,"<sup>23</sup> says the poet himself. For readers who like their mysticism printed on hand-made paper and bound in half-calf, the commentaries of John of the Cross are scarcely suitable. If they are to be fully understood they must be followed right through, spiritually. Without religious participation they always strike us as too "Spanish." Another hidden reef on which modern man is apt to founder is the symbolic way of thought which has given rise to these writings and which enables John of the Cross to interpret the Bible quite differently. With no verse of the Holy Scriptures does he ask what was the original historic sense of the sentence. Such a question falls outside his intellectual domain. His gaze is directed exclusively towards the mystical meaning of each verse. According to him God bases His words "on completely different conceptions and on a different meaning from those by means of which we are able to understand them."<sup>24</sup> Consequently, John of the Cross considers that a literal interpretation is quite irrelevant.<sup>25</sup> It was his profound perception that "we know that the language of God, in accordance with His Spirit, is different from ours and far removed from our understanding, and thus not easily to be grasped. Therefore we must not seek to measure it by the standards of our speech and our understanding."<sup>26</sup> If man will not recognise this fundamental truth he will find himself ending up in a state of absurdities. As the poet of mysticism





John of the Cross had an intuitive understanding of the different nature of Divine speech, and this led him to a clear perception of the allegory. In order to understand his works the reader also must acquire the ability to understand the symbolical way of thinking; and for this a spiritual inversion is necessary. But as soon as we have managed to master this alphabet then a wonderful light shines out from the writings of this Saint, a light which can lead us through the labyrinth of the world to the paradise of the heart.

By his own admission both the poems and the prose of John of the Cross are directed not "to everyone, but, for the present, only to certain members of our holy Order of Mount Carmel."<sup>27</sup> This warning, in which there is clearly no "everyman's philosophy" to be discerned, must be borne in mind. The exclusive circle to which they are addressed was a very restricted one. They are intended for the fortunate few; and this spirit of religious aristocracy is as important as it is characteristic. The writings of this Spanish monk do not concern men who have never given any thought to the Divine, or who, at best, in some moment of misfortune have experienced a fleeting impulse towards religion. They are no rousing calls thundering out at a mankind avid for temporal life, the mighty words of Eternity, whereby men may return again up the path of righteousness: they presuppose a Christian attitude to the world and make no attempt to establish it. If we are unfamiliar with or do not share in this background we can learn nothing from the writings of John of the Cross. They are meant for men who have already been overcome by the Divine might and are painfully seeking for the spiritual home. His writings are, in the monkish phrase, for "religious" men. All the same, beginners are not excluded. Like a wise architect John begins with the beginners, by which he means those men who have been startled out of their thoughtlessness, whose souls long for eternal beauty, and yet who are not at peace with God. Had he not begun with men like these, John would have not been the spiritual architect which he always showed himself to be. Naturally his object, with regard to these "wounded souls" who could no longer bear to remain on the lowlands of existence, was to lead them as soon as possible from the state of beginners on to the upward path of progress. In his writings he gave no thought to those who were already ascending. His pronouncements were for those men who sought after God with unresisting passion, and not for the sort of men who thought that "God should never cost them more than an occasional word, and scarcely even that; for they would never do anything which might require some exertion of them."<sup>28</sup> The frequently discussed question of to which readers his works were, in the end, addressed can only be answered by the fact that they were intended for men who sought to follow the way to holiness. This is the spiritual condition which is a prerequisite for understanding them. To all other men they remain a closed book. To such men, striving after holiness, John of the Cross gave this profound injunction: "Seek therefore your satisfaction, not in what you do understand of God, but rather in what you do not understand of Him. Your love and your

delight must not depend upon what you do conceive and perceive of God, but on that whereof you do have no understanding nor any perception."<sup>29</sup>

#### IV

The substance of the works of John of the Cross forms a sublime poem which revolves exclusively about the two poles: God and the soul. All his works are merely variations on this one theme, on which the whole interest is concentrated. To a certain extent it is as though this took possession of the whole being of John of the Cross so that all other values sink into unreality. In this attitude John shows that he was one of the most religious personalities in the history of Christianity. He does not preoccupy himself with the Heavenly Bridegroom, in order, at the conclusion of his devotional exercises, to persecute the heretics again, as, unfortunately, so often occurs in ecclesiastical history. Heretics simply did not exist for him, and there is absolutely no trace of polemics against other creeds to be found in his works, which, together, form a single, veiled confession. In his poems and in his prose works John of the Cross has, in the ultimate analysis, written nothing less than his spiritual autobiography. The soul of which he speaks so often is *his* soul. Whenever it is mentioned we may substitute the name of John of the Cross. This Saint, despite all his reticence, could not have been more outspoken than when he apparently says nothing at all about himself. Few works reveal the spiritual nature of a Saint so manifestly as do the poems of this monk.

Although it was the spiritual life of a Saint which John of the Cross was composing with such matchless ardour, it would be a mistake to regard him as a master of psychology who, like Theresa, knew how to describe spiritual occurrences in a way unknown till then. No doubt John possessed a rare knowledge of the reality of the soul. But in his case we find a highly original kind of psychology, one which from the very start is subordinated to something higher, and which obeys no self-interests. His attitude is far removed from the spiritless, academic psychology which often betrays a knowledge of the soul where there is no soul, and which is more accurately to be regarded as mental physiology. The psychology of John of the Cross constantly forges ahead into the realm of the hyper-psychological. The relationship between the soul and its God was perceived by this Spaniard, who dwelt in the transcendental like a fish in water, or rather like all Saints, from the metaphysical point of view. For this reason a person who has no acquaintance with metaphysics can never derive profit from his writings. To John of the Cross there was an essential relationship between God and soul which was beyond all discussion. The essential association of these two great things was not always identical to him. He discerns the essential presence of God in every soul, even in that of the greatest sinner on the face of the earth. It is only by means of this presence that a mortal soul can receive its being, and without it the soul would instantly crumble into nothingness.<sup>30</sup> The other way in which God's presence is manifested in the soul is through Grace. Over-

come by the realisation of the continuous proximity of God in the soul, John cried out: "What more wouldst thou, Oh soul, and what shouldst thou seek outside thee, since within thyself thou dost possess thy riches, thy bliss, thy contentment, thy satiety, and thy kingdom: in a word, the dearest thing after which thou dost yearn and seekest unremittingly."<sup>21</sup> As a Saint, John was one of those men who have everything within and nothing outside themselves, for whom the inward is more real than the outward. His poetry is thus steeped in metaphysics, so that it brings out the reality of the soul in the most emphatic manner conceivable.

The close connection between God and soul, which cannot be described in words, is one of the greatest mysteries of life according to John of the Cross. The relationship which unites the soul to God is dynamic and not static. John writes of a strange wandering of the soul, just as Dante did, but with the difference that with John this wandering does not take place only after death, but during a man's life. This Divine novel which he wrote is of peculiar colouring and intensity. As against this spiritual wandering all the adventures which modern man, in his enthusiasm for sport will undertake, shrink into nothing. They become ludicrously trivial beside it. With John of the Cross we have to deal with a journey which leads along the brink of sinister abysses and chasms. Unsuspected perils and contingencies such as have never arisen before suddenly stretch out before the soul. John of the Cross has described this spiritual wandering as the mystical ascent to holy Mount Carmel. The course of this journey is not horizontal, but vertical. One must climb higher, by stages, but continually mounting, higher and higher until at last the dizzy peaks are attained. Up the symbolic ladder of Heaven, which Jacob saw in his dream, the soul climbs even as the Angels did to Heaven. The mysterious way leads from purity through illumination into union, which stands on the very summit of the Heavenly mountain. Over and above this spiritual ascent their yawns a panorama before which the soul is utterly overwhelmed by reason of its grandeur. And all at once we understand that the face of this inward spiritual event everything else must have lost its interest for John of the Cross. How could petty trivialities possibly subsist beside this greatest of all things? They are bound to succumb before it. If we follow John's ascent up Mount Carmel the thought ultimately flashes through us: This monk still possessed that soul which, at the Creation, God breathed into man, and of which man to-day, obsessed by scientific progress, has not even the rudiments.

The mysterious wandering of the soul begins below and rises upwards. It must first free itself of the darkness which holds it in a tight embrace, and which John of the Cross portrays as dark night, in these words:

*In a night of utter dark,  
Inflamed with love and all my love's desiring,  
Oh happy destiny!  
Unseen I slipped away*

The night fulfils an important function in the mystic poetry of John of the Cross. He actually did mean night, the darkness of which fills man with trembling fear, and which often lies so grievously upon his soul. And it is precisely in this darkness, where the eye no longer sees, that this Spanish monk begins. He makes no effort whatsoever to mitigate this circumstance. But to this nocturnal phenomenon he does not associate only a negative interpretation; for it is also a sign of spiritual depth when man is able to wrest a positive meaning from the night. Although night, with the dark veil which it lays over everything makes men nervous and uneasy, it is also that same beneficent disposition which renders all living things unconscious for a few hours and takes them back into the unknown. Even in the early Church night had a profound symbolism for Christians, as we may clearly see from the liturgy. We have only to reflect that in German Christmas is called *Weihnacht*, "holy night." In modern times serious thinkers like Novalis and Görres have attributed a metaphysical significance to night. "The night is deep, and deeper than the day conceives it," Nietzsche has said; and for the new age of night which is now beginning for the present generation Berdiaev has spoken. John of the Cross, too, belongs to the class of Christians who have been pervaded by the religious significance of the night. This Saint developed a whole philosophy of night, which contains his essential wisdom. Just as Eichen-dorff in his beautiful romantic poem has dignified quiet night as the comfort of the world, so did John of the Cross describe the night as "sweeter than the morning." As the mystical singer of night he knew also that there is scarcely any other time when man experiences more powerfully his link with God, when, in the darkness, external things vanish in the silence and the stars begin to shine. For John of the Cross, moreover, the night brought revelations which the day does not know. He next distinguishes a two-fold night, a night of the senses and a night of the spirit. Both of these are harsh and fearful to men. In the mysticism of John of the Cross the concept of night is purification. The soul has to pass through this on its way to holiness. The Saint was able to write so penetratingly about the grievous torment which has to be borne in this state of darkness, since he himself had lived through it to behold the greyness of the morning. In no place do we see more clearly that the description of the ascent of Mount Carmel is no other than that of his own life, than in his profound utterances on the darkness of night.

The soul has to enter the night of the senses, if it would reach God, for only so can it free itself of terrestrial things. Its task is precisely to cut itself free of the world and not to hold fast to it. The ardent Wilderness ideal is also clearly to be seen in the mystic poetry of John of the Cross. Dependence on created things must be wiped out and longing for the things of this world set aside. The ascent of the soul can only be accomplished when the appetites of the senses have been stilled. "For just as the soil, if it is to yield fruit, must be worked over—without much toil it will only produce weeds—so must the soul, if it is to advance, first stifle all its cravings."<sup>33</sup> According to John, if the soul hankers after earthly things

it becomes fat, and this is injurious to its ascent of Mount Carmel. In order to avoid this backward step mortification must be suffered. To this end, God sends the night of the senses to the soul, and through this it must pass. For the purposes of this renunciation John has established the basic principle, which is applicable to all Christian lives, and which rarely, if ever, is heeded: the soul must direct its endeavour "not towards what is easier, but towards what is more difficult."<sup>34</sup> The night requires that the soul should be stripped utterly bare, and it should not seek to shirk this denuding of itself however hard it may be to do. This shedding of the outer shell does indeed contain the problem of how the concept of the creation of things through God can be compatible with this asceticism—a problem, of course, of which John also was fully aware. He answered the question to the effect that "these creatures are the least of God's works, for He created them, as it were, in passing."<sup>35</sup> Since the fall of man, however, created things harbour within them the danger of enticing the soul away. For this reason the way through the shedding of the shell must be trodden, the way which lies in suffering, and is "much surer than the way of joy."<sup>36</sup> John categorically declares the impossibility of "making any progress if one does not bear one's troubles and suffering in silence."<sup>37</sup> The necessity of undergoing a complete deadening or *mortification*, which we must understand by the night of the senses, is not to be regarded purely as one of the personal objectives of this Spanish Saint. Nearly all the mystics emphasise the necessity for asceticism. It is an indispensable supposition for winning through to the goal of holiness. It is absolutely essential to be rid of the sensual appetites, and to be quite cut off from the lower world. This is the inner truth of his truly terrifying Wilderness piety. The ascetic demands embrace not only the needs of the body but also the unbridled inclinations of the spirit. The latter hold man prisoner even more so than his sensual passions. The soul must do battle on both fronts. Only insofar as it undertakes this purification will it be worthy of God; but in the course of this work it must not show itself impatient to become "holy one day."<sup>38</sup> The dark night of the senses is a slow inward process of liberation, without which there can be no ascent to the heights.

Perhaps the Saints have overrated asceticism. John of the Cross also has been guilty of occasional exaggeration in this respect. But even more obvious is it to say that modern man considerably underrates the value of asceticism, and that thanks to his surrender of discipline his soul has already had to suffer grievous harm. We are all too prone to see a sort of dispossession in asceticism, and this is a short-sighted attitude. Asceticism for the sake of asceticism is, of course, quite false. But as a means to an end, it has an abiding significance. No deeply religious way of life can utterly neglect asceticism unless it is to fall into listless lethargy. John of the Cross, as we may see from his conjuration of the Spirit of the Wilderness, was one of the great ascetics. He did not only preach asceticism—like so many pseudo-mystics of to-day—he practised it. When, in the course of an illness, he had to be undressed, it was found that he had been wearing a thick iron chain, with sharp spikes, which had been wound

round his body, and "which had already grown so deeply into the flesh, that in various places the chain was quite covered over."<sup>39</sup> Not the same, but closely related experiences does every soul have to undergo in the dark night of the senses. But with the ascetic deadening or mortification of things the experience of the night is by no means completed.

Much more grievous to endure is the night of the spirit which the soul must conquer in its ascent. It is one of the hardest things which can happen to a man, and drives him almost to the borders of despair. The dark night of the spirit is the drying up of the soul, and for this reason the expression "time of dryness" is used in Spanish Mysticism. We must not mistake this state for half-heartedness, in which the soul finds no trace of the things Divine, and in which all eternity seems but shallow. Complete aridity is a much more profound experience than a mere state of exhaustion, in which the soaring of the soul momentarily fails and in which religiousness is unable to exercise its power of attraction on it. In the night of the spirit a dreadful abyss yawns open, in which the soul is engulfed by the powers of darkness. This state betrays the very greatest desolation which it is possible to conceive. The cruelty of the pain lies in the feeling that it is forsaken by God, which comes over the soul, and almost maddens it. John of the Cross himself suffered all the bitterness of this during his imprisonment at Toledo. On the basis of his own experience he has closely examined the problem of aridity, which is almost unknown to spiritual experience to-day, and which reveals, all the same, one of the most important aspects of the religious life. Not without reason do the Psalms speak so often of this sore tribulation. Again and again, in the course of its ascent, does the soul enter this spiritually parched zone, in which it has the terrifying feeling that God has rejected it, and that He wishes to have nothing more to do with it. At such times it threatens to sink down into nothingness. The consciousness of being deserted by God can lead one into a state of profound melancholy. Nobody can possibly understand the metaphysical meaning of dark night if he has not also suffered this great anguish.

When John of the Cross would not allow himself to be diverted from his purpose of ascending to God through the night of the senses and of the spirit, he was granted the most unique perception which can be given to a man. It is so immense that it can scarcely be grasped, only experienced, and never lightly imagined. And he sums up this blissful knowledge, this perception of his, in one phrase: the dark night is, at the same time, the greatest light. One can only speak of this revelation in the very greatest words. As so often when we are dealing with the Saints everything seems to be upside-down. Moreover, the perception of this came over John himself with such force, that at first he saw it back to front: "The clearer and the more open that the things of God are, so much the darker and more concealed are they, proportionately, to the soul."<sup>40</sup> John was not the first to discover that the night is also the greatest light. There were indications for him in the Psalms, pointing out the way: "Clouds and darkness are round about Him," and "at the brightness that was before

Him His thick clouds passed." And in Isaiah, too, he could read that "the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light." Nevertheless, the words of Dionysius Areopagita, which called "inspired contemplation a shaft of light shining through the darkness for the unilluminated soul," became the favourite saying of John of the Cross.<sup>41</sup> But that which in the Psalms, in Isaiah, and in Dionysius had produced the incidental illumination of a flash of lightning, only to vanish away again at once, became, to the author of the *Ascent to Mount Carmel*, the central point on which everything was based. The recognition that the soul receives the light through the dark night, and only through this, forms the first peak of John of the Cross's mystical life of holiness. According to this, "the soul receives more light, the more it is hidden in darkness."<sup>42</sup> He was constantly preoccupied by the tremendous revelation of the Divine light, which rises up before the soul in the midst of the blackest darkness. It aroused the most violent agitation within him, but John was resolved to follow this unknown path: "One should rather be blind and remain in darkness, if one would receive the Divine light into oneself, than open one's eyes."<sup>43</sup> Over and again he emphasises that if the soul would draw near to God, "then it has no option but to associate itself to that dark cloud, in which, according to Solomon, the Lord is wont to speak."<sup>44</sup> Only that soul which not only ceases to fight against the darkness but even welcomes it will receive the light of the Lord. It does not begin to shine either before or after this night, but *in* the night. Night is light: this is the paradox we have to face. It is the highly conclusive and triumphant recognition of this which came over John of the Cross during his months of imprisonment in Toledo. It is something which is of timeless validity. Its full importance is not in the least appreciated even to-day, nor has it ever been turned to any good account. And yet one cannot conceive of any greater conquest of the fear of the darkness of life, than that which is manifested in this eternal truth.

The dark night which is turned into the brightest light, is to be regarded as the state of "bright darkness" in which the soul of this Saint dwelt. One cannot help thinking of Rembrandt, who, with a painter's art, showed how light breaks through the deepest darkness, and yet, at the same time, remains peculiarly bound to it. John of the Cross anticipated in words what Rembrandt painted, and Rembrandt has illustrated on canvas what John of the Cross had previously expressed in his mystical works through the medium of language. They provide each other with mutual corroboration. As with Rembrandt so with the Spanish monk darkness is to be understood in its metaphysical sense as an image which God too has created. It does not simply arise from out of the lower world in which the Satanic powers celebrate their orgies. The darkness of which John speaks arises from that light which blinds the eye of man with the brilliance of the sun, and for this reason it has to be softened. It is that "darkness from above which arises out of the other-worldliness of the Divine life and in which it participates," as Garrigou Lagrange has said in another connection.<sup>45</sup> The paradoxical truth that night is light, cannot be

understood by means of rational arguments. It rests on a different plane from that on which the intellect moves:

*The higher up one rises  
The less one understands  
That the dark cloud it is,  
Which lights up all the night.*<sup>46</sup>

We may infer from this that it is God Himself Who lets the soul undergo this strangest of all strange experiences. To John, God was a "burning brand," as he says in regard to Moses' burning bush, although he knew that "if a man sought to imagine God according to anything, such as a great fire, or a brilliance of light, or anything at all like him, then he would be mistaken."<sup>47</sup> To John, the brightness was always covered over by the darkness so as to conceal the grandeur of God. In this twilight life there is only a fragmentary recognition of God, which is fitting for the notion of bright darkness. "In this life we cannot grasp at all what God is like," for "the distance between the Divine being and the created being is infinite."<sup>48</sup> Therefore "everything that we can perceive with our intellect, experience with our will-power, and conceive with our imagination, is wholly unlike God, and is wholly disproportionate to His greatness."<sup>49</sup> It was the *Deus absconditus*, Whom John of the Cross encountered in his wanderings.

In order to be equal to the experience of bright darkness, the soul must be armed with faith. John of the Cross stresses the importance of this again and again, since it is of the utmost importance for the ascent of the soul:

*Though that eternal Fountain now lies hidden,  
Full well I know where it doth have its lair,  
Although 'tis night.*<sup>50</sup>

With unswerving faith the soul must struggle on its upward path, and, in the arid phase, it must cast aside the light of reason. John knew, of course, that the Holy Spirit can also illuminate the intellect. And it is for this reason that he sometimes speaks of a "loving perception."<sup>51</sup> But in the state of dark night "the understanding must not interpose itself, but must remain completely passive, and set aside its natural powers of comprehension."<sup>52</sup> Only in faith can the soul completely rid itself of the outer shell, and pass through the arid zone. The ascent of Mount Carmel is accomplished principally by faith. John of the Cross speaks of the need for faith, as all great Christians have done, with a warmth which leaves behind it an abiding impression. That mysticism can never render faith superfluous is clearly to be seen in his precepts, which constantly emphasise the importance of faith. He has described faith as night, which we need not wonder at in view of his double estimate of the latter. Faith meant more to this Spaniard than pictures and statues which often, in his view, serve human vanity only.<sup>53</sup> It is always amazing how calmly this Christian

speaks, in contradiction of his own people, about the rosary and about pilgrimages.<sup>54</sup> Being a true son of the Catholic Church he does not reject them, but by him they are put back into their proper places and vigorously applied to their proper uses. Thoughtless abuse, to which they were often subjected, found an active opponent in John. This Saint is entirely free of concessions to an un-Christian form of national piety. With his spiritual perception he based himself on no material foundations of faith, since inwardly he had risen above them. Over and over again he pointed out faith to the soul as its strongest mainstay in the dark night and as the indispensable leader throughout the ascent to God.

Correlated to the pronouncements of John of the Cross on faith is his superior attitude to visions. Never could anyone say that he had surrendered himself to exaggerated descriptions of visionary experiences. He has expressed his opinion of these "sweetnesses" very clearly, saying that he regards them as "water shoots, which do not help towards progress."<sup>55</sup> Warningly he raises his hand: "These feelings of rapturous bliss do not lead the soul out of itself to God; rather do they cause the soul to find its own sufficiency in them."<sup>56</sup> In its ascent towards God the soul must rid itself of its craving for recreations and delights, for these too are to be regarded as being inspired by the devil. They lull the soul into the delusion that it has been in direct communication with God, which is often completely false. John classified all visions, revelations, and supernatural feelings merely as "motes in the spiritual sunlight," as opposed to which the slightest act of humility was of greater significance. In order to reach its goal the soul has no need of *this* sort of supernatural pardon. Indeed it may easily give rise to the wrong sort of ascent, which has been established by John of the Cross with quiet superiority: "We have our natural reason, the law and the teaching of the Gospel: this is quite sufficient for our spiritual guidance. There are no obstacles which cannot be overcome, and no spiritual ill which cannot be healed by these means; and indeed this is more pleasing to God and more profitable to the soul than the other way."<sup>57</sup>

These attitudes to visions from the pen of John of the Cross are of even greater importance since, as the poet of mysticism, he was himself one of the greatest ecstatic visionaries of the Christian Church. But at least he did not long for visions; rather did they themselves seek him out. If anyone ever knew of that infinite sweetness which the soul in ecstasy can endure, it was John of the Cross, who has written of this blissful rapture in his poetry:

*I was so deeply rapt,  
So perfectly absorbed,  
My senses all were void  
Of any sentiment;  
My spirit was endowed  
With deep unwitting wisdom  
All knowledge far transcending.*<sup>58</sup>

John of the Cross was an ecstatic to such a degree that nearly every day he fell into a state of visionary rapture. In the end it was sufficient to say the word "Cross" for him to be seized in a Divine ecstasy. These ecstasies "often carried him away so that he would converse with inanimate creatures, especially with trees, and he would exhort them to procure him the means whereby he might become a martyr for Christ."<sup>59</sup> Miraculous levitations which lifted him to the ceiling of the room were not infrequent. He was even seen once, when in a state of ecstasy, to be floating through the air over the tops of the forest trees. John was a radiant form, upon whose countenance a brilliant illumination was often observed, and from whom it was remarked that there was a supernatural outpouring of spiritual fire. At times his gloomy prison cell would be filled with an unearthly radiance, and in a religious rapture he once began to dance and sing.<sup>60</sup> Like Theresa, this man had been pierced by the "burning arrow," even though, in accordance with his restrained nature, he does not speak of his ecstatic experiences in his writings. But he did pray to God to enlarge his heart, since his natural strength was insufficient to contain so much illumination. For all these reasons it is understandable that even in his own lifetime he should have been called a Saint; and many people saw in him either a "divine magician," or a "seraph incarnate." During one of his ecstasies John of the Cross was painted, and he afterwards fell into such a fury at this that it was even mentioned at his canonisation. But posterity is grateful for this event since it provides the only valuable portrait of the Saint. The cameo, which is in the possession of the Carmelite Monastery at Troyes, depicts a countenance, shining forth out of the dark, "the quiet life of which appears to emanate from the light which pours down on it; the eyes, gazing and unseeing, are turned upwards; the mouth is slightly open, the will is completely extinguished. The countenance has to a certain extent been transported into the realm of light; a profoundly painful, yet resigned yearning, which the eyes reveal, gives it its character; it is like a silent thirst which slowly, by an eternally flowing spring, is quenched. The exaltation, the pure tranquillity of ecstasy which these features show, could only be found on the countenance of a Saint."<sup>61</sup>

Faith and vision are indications that the soul has moved on its journeying from purification into the second stage of illumination. All the directions which John of the Cross has given for finding the way to God are always to be regarded purely as straight lines which have to be followed, and never as mere labels. There is a fundamental difference between John of the Cross and the Indian Yogis. The reformer of the Carmelite Order had no mystical technique. To him the relationship of the soul to God was one of the most subtle and delicate of things, something of which a poet may sing, but which cannot be analysed by a set of rules. In no circumstances can it become a mere matter of routine. Nor is the same way prescribed for all souls. Some are granted one way, others another way. But above all other things does John of the Cross make it clear that in spite of all the exertions which the soul may employ in its ascent of Mount Carmel, it never fully

attains its objective. Ascending love can never reach higher than the topmost rung of the Heavenly ladder. The active efforts of the soul are indeed necessary, but they have their limits. In the end they must be transformed into a passive attitude, in which the soul has to wait. Then it not only strives after God, but also God after it.<sup>62</sup> For there is also a love descending from God, which is the central core of the Gospel, and which comes to meet the upward climbing love of the soul. This meeting between God and the soul establishes a relationship for which even the purest and most spiritual of words are quite inadequate.

In this passive stage it is an extremely rare experience of the heart which, with much pain and much bliss, is enacted between God and the soul. Extraordinary are the expressions which John of the Cross uses in this connection:

*I left it in the hope  
Of what I hoped from Thee;  
And there love wounded me  
And took my heart from me.*

*I said that it should kill me,  
Since it did wound me so;  
I plunged within its fire  
Knowing it burnèd me.<sup>63</sup>*

Such brimming-over words are not used by John of the Cross only in his poems, but also in his commentaries: "The more deeply the lover is wounded, the more perfectly does he enjoy health; and the healing through love is because it strikes wound upon wound, until the wound is so large that the soul vanishes utterly in the wound of love."<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, in his prose works John of the Cross can speak of his great experience in nothing but the language of love, which betrays that state of blissfulness which only all-embracing love knows. There is no room for any misunderstanding on this score: neither lustfulness nor sexual passions spring from his utterances, which are delivered with unparalleled warmth and intensity. It is obvious that for his images and similes John takes refuge in the words written in the Epistle to the Ephesians: "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ." Naturally the images which man employs in attempting to explain these indescribable feelings are not chosen haphazard. John of the Cross speaks of a union of love because this is the utmost, and the most profound relationship which can bind two mortals together. This Spanish monk writes of a spiritual fire which burns within passionate love, "for in all things and in all the thoughts which the soul discovers within itself, in all the affairs which are required of it, everything is accomplished in many ways, but all inspired with love and desiring; and it suffers this longing for love at all times and in all places in different manners, and it is never satisfied, and it is never kindled and wounded by this violent yearning."<sup>65</sup> According to John of the Cross this mystic love

is like a "magnificent scarlet raiment, which invests not only the white of faith and the green of hope but also all other virtues with freshness and grace and beauty; without love no virtue is pleasing in the eyes of God."<sup>66</sup> It is no mere chance that John of the Cross uses the phrase "scarlet raiment" when he is speaking of love. A crimson glow really does seem to shine out from John's descriptions of the relationship between God and the soul. Behind his burning words is the significant perception that we can only reach God by the "way of love."<sup>67</sup> A soul's perfection is shown by its capacity for love. The success of its flight to God depends on how much love it has been able to generate. "A spark of pure love is more precious before God, more useful to the soul, and more beneficent to the Church, than are all other works, even though it gives the impression of doing nothing."<sup>68</sup> One can have slight knowledge and yet a high degree of love. According to John of the Cross "the will must drink love," and only this "divine drinking" brings the soul nearer to God.<sup>69</sup> This Spanish mystic could not do enough: he wanted to do even more than love, he wanted to love inwardly, and speaks of a double love.<sup>70</sup> Out of his frenzied longing for love these lines have flowed:

*Love doth work this way,  
Since I to love did come,  
That ill or good in me  
Are both together one,  
The soul transformed to love;  
And thus in its sweet flame,  
Which I do feel in me,  
Swiftly, no trace remaining,  
Now am I all consumed.<sup>71</sup>*

Like the Bride in the Song of Solomon he feels "sick of love," and longs for it to become greater and greater: "The aspect of Thy beauty shall kill me."<sup>72</sup> The soul wants to die, "to die the death of love,"<sup>73</sup> since "for the loving soul death can have no bitterness, for in it the soul will find all the bliss and sweetness of love."<sup>74</sup> As high as the intoxicating death of love does the yearning of this poet of mysticism reach out.

The summit of this precipitate experience in the ascent of Mount Carmel is the union, which is the third stage, and which John of the Cross himself describes in the following words: "It is proper to love, after union, to strive after likeness and similarity to the Beloved."<sup>75</sup> But this highest goal of the mystic union can only be attained by *one* way: "It is love alone which can unify the soul and unite it with God."<sup>76</sup> The ultimate striving of the soul is directed towards the supernatural love-union of the soul with God, and it must be regarded as the blissful ending of the spiritual life of John of the Cross. Towards this experience which simply cannot be surpassed the love-intoxicated soul of the Saint strove onward. We feel that we can almost touch the secret of the inmost core of his personality, when we read his description of the ineffable moment of fusion. "God

reveals Himself so perfectly in this union of the soul, that neither the love of a mother to her child, nor the love of a friend or brother, can be compared with it. What a wondrous thing this is! Must it not fill us with amazement, and with anxiety?"<sup>77</sup> Incomparable words did John write about the Heavenly bliss of the mystical marriage, which indeed only a Saint who was a poet could have written:

*He gave me there His breast,  
And there did teach me knowledge rich and rare,  
And utterly I gave  
Myself, nor ought retained;  
There did I promise I would be His bride.*<sup>78</sup>

In this union "there is such a close spiritual alliance of both natures, and such a living communication of the Divine and human personalities, that each of them, without in anyway losing their identities, appears to be God."<sup>79</sup> Poor are man's words to express this most holy experience. They die on one's lips, and one relapses into silence. It is something which is far beyond the realm of words. "When the union of love is achieved, the soul is so deeply and so vitally impressed with the form of the Beloved that one can say: The Beloved lives in the lover, and the lover in the Beloved. By its transformation love brings about a similarity within the lovers, so that each and both are one."<sup>80</sup> The only imperfection in this mystical experience lies in the fact that there can be no enduring union in this life, only a fleeting one which can never last. The ecstatic merging of one into the other of God and the soul has often been described as "identification." This misunderstanding should be dismissed at once in view of the use of the word "union." Where there is a union there must always be two beings which have the urge to enter into one another. Indeed, at such a moment, "the soul seems to be more of God than soul. And it is God, but only insofar as it participates in His essence. In the same way moreover, despite the transformation, it retains its own natural being which is so utterly different from that of God, just as a glass, through which the sunlight pours, is never separated from its own distinct nature."<sup>81</sup> What John of the Cross had to say about the union of the soul and God must, of course, be understood as a simile, and the flowing of the one into the other must be regarded as a conclusive symbol, which would come readily to a poet, and which can give the most complete fulfilment to a life which so often appears to be quite meaningless.

It is an incomprehensible event which John of the Cross tries to explain with his descriptions of the "union." At heart he knows that he is speaking of something whereof a man can speak no more. That is why he poured out his overflowing vessel into poetry. But even he himself calls the language of his poems merely a helpless stammering. Although this man vibrated in the supreme experience of human life, even he could only find a few words with which to tell the untellable. No human means of expression was fitted to describe the imponderable of this Divine experience.

John of the Cross himself many a time had to appreciate the immeasurable nature of it all, and the Saint often complains of his inarticulate helplessness. We must bear in mind this tormenting feeling of impossibility if we would understand the soul of the Spanish mystic. Reluctantly did John force himself to write his books, which nearly all break off before the end. "He felt clearly the inadequacy of speech."<sup>82</sup> And from the pen of this monk came this: "Moreover I will not speak of this; whereby I do not mean that one could describe this experience in words. There are no words to describe the sublime things of God which such souls experience, nor could they be named by their right names."<sup>83</sup> Whatever we may say, everything must necessarily fall short of the Divine reality. "What is immeasurable cannot be decked out in words."<sup>84</sup>

This distinct feeling for the impossibility of expression was always a special characteristic of mystical theology. Unquestionably John of the Cross was one of its greatest representatives, to whom the title of *Doctor Mysticus* was most suitable. Mystical theology teaches a peculiar and wonderful "science of love." Nothing could be more foolish than to judge this "hypersweet knowledge" of the "mysterious science of God"<sup>85</sup> from the point of view of any of the schools of theology. Rather is it a poem—not in the sense of something unreal, but in the sense of a visionary ability—which appears in supernatural dimensions. In the theology of mysticism "God instructs the soul without the sound of words, without the aid of any physical or spiritual sense, in peace and quiet, in a complete oblivion of all that is sensuous and natural, indeed, in a completely veiled and secret manner, almost without the realisation of what is taking place. Some spiritual teachers call this the understanding of the soul through understanding nothing."<sup>86</sup> And how ineffably precious is this Divine instruction, in which the soul is imbued with sweet peace. This mystical experience cannot be taught, it can only be lived. It has a spiritual relationship with the apophatic theology of Dionysius, to which it finds its way back, for to it too "those conceptions of God and those discursive meditations were all alien, although they sought to reveal His might; all they showed was the impossibility of forming an idea of God even after the most searching efforts of the power of imagination."<sup>87</sup> The poet of mysticism realised that man can only reach God by not knowing; and this is one of the greatest mysteries of all time.

*This knowledge all unknowing  
Is of such great power  
That sages arguing  
Can never master it;  
Their knowledge does not reach  
To deep unwitting wisdom  
All knowledge far transcending.*<sup>88</sup>

The story of the Saint's inward life, with its ascent of Mount Carmel, is of such spiritual power that it completely overshadows his outward life, which scarcely enters the picture. And yet it is necessary to make a brief mention of the events which befell John of the Cross in the second half of his life, for they are not devoid of drama. They provide him with the necessary framework, which is outwardly of a depressing gloom, while inwardly he was flooded with radiance—a most unusual contrast to encounter.

During his imprisonment at Toledo this resigned and patient man, ever ready to accept pain and suffering, realised eventually that a longer sojourn in prison must inevitably lead to his death. He began to make plans for his freedom (which he had previously rejected), and seizing a favourable opportunity he made good his escape in a highly adventurous manner. Knotting together strips of his bed-cover, he lowered himself on a moonless night down into the prison yard. With his last remaining strength he managed to scale the walls, and in a state of exhaustion knocked at the door of a nearby convent where he said to a terrified nun: "Little daughter, I am John of the Cross, and have to-night escaped from prison. Tell the Mother Prioress."<sup>89</sup> Thanks to the intervention of Philip II, whose aid Theresa had invoked, the persecution of the reformers came to an end, in which the dispute was resolved by a division into two provinces.

Yet even with this decision John of the Cross's life was not yet rid of all unpleasantness. This began again after Theresa's death, only this time even the members of the new order joined in. Petty rivalries arose in the ranks of the Discalced Carmelites. Attempts were set in motion to have the Order follow a more missionary course. John of the Cross, however, was not the sort of person to let this pass in silence, since he believed it to be contrary to the fundamental spirit of the reform. With his complete fearlessness, which he had already shown in the way he upheld his principles in the monastery, even when he had to stand quite alone and found himself obliged to contradict the authorities, he now once more drew the hatred of his superiors upon him. Out of the fact that self-sufficient men are not beloved within the Order is to be explained the new hostility which pursued him till his dying day. In the discussions about the future course which the Order he had founded was to follow, the Provincial was out-voted. In this connection the latter wrote to John of the Cross, whom he now sought to dispossess with veritable hatred. He was successful in the end in achieving the Saint's downfall, and even in having the question deliberated as to whether he should be expelled from the Order. Rumours were whispered everywhere, and the author of the *Ascent to Mount Carmel* was accused of illicit association with nuns. The charges were of such baseness that John of the Cross considered it beneath his dignity to answer them. He also forbade the nuns to reply to the charges. This was taken as connivance at his guilt. "His opponents now had a free hand to say anything they liked against him. Even his former

associates and friends were unfaithful to him; they wrote and told him that he was a wicked man, and that his piety was sheer hypocrisy."<sup>90</sup> John withdrew into the Wilderness at Pernuela, and eventually received an order to go to Mexico as a missionary. In this way they thought they would be honourably rid of him.

While he was making his preparations for the journey, he hurt his foot, and found himself obliged to seek the shelter of a monastery. Although he had a free choice in the matter, he went to Ubeda because the Prior was hostile to him. Scarcely had he reached the door when he fell gravely ill. He attempted to conceal his fevered state, but in the end he was obliged to lie down. The Prior of the monastery tormented him in the most shameful manner, showering him with coarse abuse, and pitilessly abandoning him to his illness. A treatment which beggars description for the indignity and callousness of it was meted out to the dying man. His body was covered with a multitude of sores which suppurated the whole time. His bedclothes were never changed, and he was allowed no visitors.

The pitiful sight of John of the Cross during his last illness recalls Job. Indeed the monks of the monastery must have thought of the stricken Job, covered with boils, scraping himself with a potsherd, and sitting among the ashes, for they mentioned it to John. The Saint, in his humility, naturally rejected this parallel. All the same, the comparison is apt, and gives a much clearer impression of the last phase. John of the Cross is the Spanish Job upon the dunghill, who attracted suffering like a magnet, and, in accordance with his name, bore the Cross. After more than two months of agony, before he was yet fifty years of age, he passed into the undying splendour, which God had made ready for him; as He does for those whom He loves.

Scarcely had John of the Cross closed his eyes for ever when there arose a dispute about his mortal frame. More than one city claimed the honour of sheltering it, and the quarrelling only ended with the unsavoury truncation of his body. But according to one account the place of his burial was to remain in oblivion, so that no one should find his grave. However this may be the Order was soon filled with the recognition that John of the Cross was a Saint. The poet of mysticism is undoubtedly one of the greatest Saints of the Church, for his external life as much as for his spiritual ascent. His mystical Grace had brought him into that proximity to God which is always the sign of a true Saint. But it is precisely this great Saint who wrote: "Never take a man, however holy he may be, to be your model, for the evil enemy will show you his imperfections! Follow rather Jesus Christ, who is the summit of perfection and of holiness, and you will never go astray!"<sup>91</sup>

## THE MIRACULOUS DRAUGHT OF FISHES

### Francis de Sales

1567—1622

#### I

ONE OF Konrad Witz' most impressive paintings is called "The Miraculous Draught of Fishes." Before this picture, with its beguiling beauty, a man can stand for long without growing weary of it. In sublime godliness an immense Christ walks upon the waters, diffusing an awe-inspiring majesty about Him. Boundless amazement is depicted on the faces of the disciples at the unexpected apparition of the Lord. The event is shown against the background of Lake Geneva, the magic beauty of which provides a fitting parallel to the miracle. It is difficult to say if there is a greater power of attraction in the earthly or the unearthly aspect of this astonishing picture.

One recalls this painting in considering the life of Francis de Sales. What Konrad Witz so simply and yet so artistically portrays, is what we find too in this Saint. The Miraculous Draught of Fishes: this is the formula whereby we may best understand the figure of Francis de Sales. The same beauty, the same candour, and the same faith, which filled the painter of the late Middle Ages, are to be found in the Bishop of Geneva. It is not only the appropriateness of the beautiful landscape of the Lake of Geneva, the spirit of which it is difficult to portray in words, and which is so faithfully reflected in Francis of Sales as a true son of the region, but, principally, the purpose, also at the bidding of the Lord, to make a miraculous catch of fish. This allows the painting by Konrad Witz and the figure of the Saint to merge into one.

In order to assess the achievements of Francis de Sales we must briefly consider the age in which he lived. France, with her great Christian past, was at that time passing through a period of transition from the Renaissance to the Baroque. This was marked by the confessional disputes, which, in France, had assumed a sanguinary form. The religious conversations between Catholics and Protestants had everywhere broken down, and had given way to the force of arms. After the blood bath of Vassy, to which the Catholics treated the Protestants, came the Huguenots' inconsiderate attack on Lyons. But all these barbarities were surpassed by the monstrous massacre on Saint Bartholomew's night in which thousands of Protestants were treacherously murdered. A terrible religious war rent France in twain, with the result that morals were relaxed and ran wild. The devasta-

ting desolation of the dispute between Reformation and Counter-Reformation came to an end with the reinstatement of Catholicism, which had to pay for its new exclusiveness with the sacrifice of its former universality and simplicity.

This is the situation which we must bear in mind if we are to view Francis de Sales, who exercised an important influence on French spiritual life, in the right perspective. His activity in this respect can be regarded as a fishing excursion in which he brought his catch home to Christ. He sought to bring back into the bosom of the Church a mankind which had become unsure of its religious life. He attempted to do this in a circumspect and yet resolute way so that it was not once realised as such by the interested parties. This underlies nearly all his actions, and his figure must be examined in this light if we are to understand the spiritual melody of his life.

Francis de Sales strove to achieve his objective by both oral and written means. Nowadays however we can hardly receive a just impression of the charm of his personality. The portraits of him which remain to-day are all disappointing, since they represent him in too rigid and formal an attitude. The impression of disunion which they give one is, moreover, to be attributed to the incompetence of the artist, as Francis de Sales himself has said: "I am informed that I am sometimes but ill treated by the painter's brush; but it is of slight importance."<sup>1</sup> Posterity may infer the attraction of his personality from his writings, of which this is a just estimate: "Francis de Sales means goodness, it means human friendship, it means gentleness, joy, and that pure, sublime nobility of the soul which is not of the Paris salon but of the communion with God and pure brotherliness, as though on its own, without any book of rules or lessons in deportment; and it is warm and precious to us. Francis de Sales is like a holy smiling, a fine, sincere understanding, a wise pardon, a gentle judgment, and all without any distinctive peculiarity, any use of power, any exceptional burdens, all in the normal course of work, in the coming and going of everyday life."<sup>2</sup> The Bishop of Geneva did indeed personify to an extraordinary degree the excellences of the French nation, as they are rarely to be encountered in his century. With all his restraint there streams from him a warmth which has a remarkable fascination for us. This is no mere cordial sincerity with nothing behind it, for we seem to behold the very soul of the man. His writings reveal a culture, a superiority and a religiousness, which, through all the intervening centuries, have lost little of their magic. Their shrewdness and their piety can best be compared with the music of Joseph Haydn. But it was Ernst Hello who noted that "Saint Francis de Sales has not all the marks of greatness, since he does not speak to all mankind but only to a part of it."<sup>3</sup> This offers, however, no serious objection to Francis de Sales, for who ever does speak to all mankind? Nobody; or at least only One. The Savoyard Saint has at any rate spoken to many men, and still does so to-day. His precepts are an imperishable heritage which cannot be readily assessed, since they prove to be more fundamental than is generally supposed.

## II

"The life of Francis de Sales, by reason of the progression of its perfection and its completeness, is in every way like a work of art, upon which the artist, with painstaking care, with a sureness of his objective, and with delight, has worked to produce an inviolable beauty, as is proper to small masterpieces."<sup>4</sup> This pronouncement reveals the whole essence of the man. Proportion and order, harmony and dignity, are to be found in the life of Francis de Sales, which progressed in an ever ascending line. The legend, according to which Francis revealed his holiness as a toddler by suddenly announcing, "God and my mother love me very much," ignores the great distance which this man had to travel. He reached holiness through slow, hard work, and it is not easy to follow the various stages of his progress.

Francis de Sales belonged to a family which had been established in Savoy ever since the thirteenth century. He was a man of the frontier, who united within him both the French and Italian characteristics, and whose nature was thus, through and through, Latin. The de Sales family belonged to the provincial nobility, and Francis himself never disavowed the nobleman. He was possessed of elegant manners, and always comported himself with distinction. He was never at a loss and always knew how to master the problems of social intercourse. Although he was a distinguished person, this count's son set no store by his noble ancestry. He was entirely free from the haughty arrogance of his rank. As a pure aristocrat he knew exactly how to associate with simple people.

In conformity with this noble background was his education. From his sixth year on he was given instruction by a private tutor, and at an early age he was sent to the College of the Jesuits at Paris. In accordance with the family tradition he naturally followed all the pursuits proper to his condition. Dancing, riding, and swordsmanship all formed part of the education of an elegant young noble, and it was as a polished cavalier that he entered the University of Padua, which boasted the best faculty of laws in those days. In deference to his father's wish he studied jurisprudence, although his own inclinations favoured theology. He attempted to combine the two, an endeavour in which we may already discern the Francis of later years, who held that a harmonising of religious and intellectual life was necessary for spiritual serenity. He began studying the Early Fathers, Chrysostom, Augustine, Hieronimus, and, above all, Cyprian, whom he esteemed most highly on account of his beauty of style, his clarity, and the imagery of his expression. His legal studies began to interest him less and less, and he felt that he was unsuited for the disputes of the lawyers.

In the midst of his studies he was afflicted by a grave spiritual crisis. He was obsessed by the thought that he was one of the damned. The doctrine of grace was one which sorely preoccupied Catholicism at that time, and was a problem in which Dominicans and Jesuits were in violent disagreement. The question was a dangerous temptation to Francis.

He became more and more deeply entangled, and in the end he regarded every act of piety as sheer fraud. In the consciousness that he was one of the damned he suffered grievously, and even grew visibly weaker physically. In his distress he sought comfort from the Church, and redoubled his religious devotions—which did not, at first, help him at all. It was only when he threw himself down before a picture of the Virgin Mary that he suddenly felt that he was freed from his temptation. He felt himself filled once more with his innate religious optimism, which could not be transformed by mere superficialities. His attitude of faith never left him after this. Yet he never forgot these attacks of melancholy and sombre dejectedness, and this stood him in good stead later on. Only for this reason was Francis de Sales able to understand so well the struggles of men's souls, since he himself had been through a time of bitterness.

At the conclusion of his legal studies Francis de Sales surprised his parents by expressing his wish to enter the priesthood, and it was only reluctantly that his disappointed father gave his consent to this. The decision did not mark a sudden change in the course of his life, however, since it had developed naturally and slowly out of his theological interests. It is characteristic of Francis de Sales that this was the result of a conscious, organic growth, and not a sudden act of impulse. At Padua the Jesuit Possavia had instilled into him the thought that the Reformation would never have reached such proportions if it had not been for the ignorance of the clergy, and that piety without knowledge was just as inadequate as knowledge without piety. This view fitted in with his own, and he pursued his theological studies with renewed zest. Francis was ordained at the age of twenty-six, and appointed as provost to the Cathedral of his native diocese.

Francis de Sales was a zealous priest. He was not one of those noble prelates who consider their ecclesiastical appointments purely as a source of income. Rather did he regard himself as toiling in the vineyard of the Lord, to which task he must apply himself unremittingly. He was untiringly active in the confessional, and often found himself in the state of having to offer his own handkerchief to the penitents, whom he had reduced to tears. Even more zealous was he in his preaching, so that even his father said to him, shaking his head, "Provost, you preach to me too often. I hear the church bells ringing even on working days, and someone always says to me, 'That's the provost! It wasn't like that in my day! They didn't preach so often then, but what sermons they were. . . .' And now you're making it all so ordinary that it doesn't make a great impression on one any more, and men are beginning to lose their respect for you."<sup>5</sup> His father's fears, however, were ill-founded, nor did Francis allow himself to be led astray. In his desire for extra activity, he took upon himself more and more duties.

When his superior began to look about for suitable people to act as missionaries among the Calvinistic inhabitants of Chablais, Francis de Sales willingly submitted his name. His parents argued vigorously against this difficult undertaking, but he was irresistibly attracted to it by reason

of its very unusualness. Francis' voluntary offering of himself as a missionary was, like most men's acts, the result of several component factors. Certainly his heroic resolve sprang from an ardent zeal to save men's souls, which Jeanne de Chantal pointed out as his predominant quality. Although it is perhaps too much to speak of a "zeal for saving souls," the thoughts of Francis de Sales were certainly aimed at the saving of souls, and this must be associated with his confessional zeal, which was an essential part of his nature. But side by side with this altruistic interest there was also the priestly desire to expand his Church, which must be regarded as an urgent necessity. Both these motives became intertwined with each other in the provost's soul, so that they can now scarcely be separated. At any rate it was now that he first began to cast out those nets, which oblige us to regard his life's work in the image of the miraculous draught of fishes.

Since the inhabitants of Chablais had been hardened Huguenots for two generations they refused to have anything to do with Francis de Sales, and regarded him as an unwanted interloper. Although he believed in the principle that a drop of honey attracts more flies than a whole cask of vinegar, he encountered nothing but deaf ears, and everywhere met with cold rebuffs. The countryfolk rejected his smiling friendliness, and saw through all his pious ruses, however cautiously he made use of them. Francis de Sales must have had to bear with many insults and suffer many hardships at this time. He frequently found himself in highly dangerous situations which might well have cost him his life. In one village, where nobody would take him in, he had to spend an icy cold night in a baker's oven; and on another occasion he was found by some wood-cutters almost frozen to death sleeping up in a tree. During the harsh winter months Francis de Sales had to bear many hardships in that mountainous region, and to overcome countless obstacles in his journeys to the remote outlying parts. It was a far from pleasant existence which was his lot at Chablais, for he was met with toil and privations wherever he went. In the biographies of Francis de Sales his missionary activity is rightly esteemed as a period of real heroism, and even to-day it is held up as a model to priests. And that it was so is beyond all manner of doubt: only a fearless and courageous man could have undertaken such dangerous work with the truly apostolic zeal of Francis.

And the results of all this activity? Scarcely anything at all! After Francis de Sales had spent two consecutive years, attempting to win back the Protestant populace of Chablais, he had succeeded in making exactly nineteen converts. Perhaps, then, he was using the wrong net? Or perhaps he had underestimated the religious strength which had arisen in Protestantism, and he had not been prepared to admit this? However this may be, the results were extremely depressing to him. Francis de Sales might well have said with the disciples: "Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing." If he were to continue at this rate he would not complete his task in a hundred years. Although there was no means which he did not use in his attempt to draw the people to him—

arguing, preaching, writing, always remaining friendly, never losing patience, treading gently so as to hurt no feelings—the opposition to Catholicism in no wise abated. He was running against a solid wall.

And yet it must now be said that Francis de Sales was, in the end, so successful, that he completed his missionary activities with no less than twenty thousand converted Huguenots to his credit, and that he led the entire community of Chablais back to the Catholic Church. And he is famed with having won seventy thousand heretics to his creed during his lifetime. There is no reason to doubt the veracity of these statements. But in order to assess the religious value of these conversions we must notice what way he finally followed in order to reach his goal. Obviously not by means of the tracts which he surreptitiously pushed under the doors of the Chablais houses. For these proved to be almost as ineffective as his sermons.

When Francis de Sales was eventually convinced that all his endeavours were in vain he changed his method. He had recourse to an attitude which, from the Christian point of view, is greatly to be deplored. Indeed the manner in which he discharged his commission to bring the aged Theodore Beza of Geneva back to the Church cannot stand up to a serious scrutiny. Francis, disguised as a dealer, frequently entered Protestant Rome (and was censured by Pope Clement VIII for doing so), in order to offer Beza, in the event of his conversion, “a pension of four thousand golden thalers”; and he was prepared to offer even more, “for he well knew the value of such a conquest!”<sup>6</sup> This somewhat ambiguous proposal must have appeared to the aged Beza as an attempt to buy his soul with money in order to be able to celebrate the victory afterwards. The Calvinist naturally rejected the offer in indignation. This, moreover, was not the only slip of which Francis de Sales was guilty. Much more serious was his decision to invoke the assistance of the State in his missionary campaign. Francis de Sales found the Augustinian way out: “Compel them to come in!” Although he deprecated it, he expressly required a company of soldiers to enforce his words with their muskets. The Duke of Savoy, to whom Chablais owed allegiance, was only too ready for this act of violence. As feudal prince, he decreed the expulsion of all Protestant preachers, the confiscation of all evangelical writings and the exclusion of the Huguenots from all public offices. Accompanied by Francis de Sales, the Duke descended upon the capital city of the region, assembled the entire populace about him and told them that if any Huguenots still clung to their faith they would feel the full force of his displeasure, in that they must remove from his territory forthwith. The Protestants were thus confronted, at short notice, with the alternatives of embracing Catholicism or being exiled from Savoy. By this forceful means was the conversion of Chablais to Catholicism effected.<sup>7</sup> The contention that this was all the work of the Duke and not of Francis de Sales is refuted by the fact that the provost of Annecy supported the Duke in all these measures, and even invested the Prince with his own authority.

In this affair Francis de Sales showed himself as a true son of his age.

The sixteenth century paid homage to the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, and savagely attacked men of any other faith. It was not only Catholicism which observed this maxim, for, similarly, in those days Protestantism would not tolerate any Catholics. Only a few enlightened Christians, ahead of their age, fought for Christian tolerance. Intolerant exclusiveness, however, was the characteristic of the time, and for this reason we cannot reproach Francis de Sales too severely. In this connection he was no better than his century, and it is not proper, in this particular instance, to regard him as a Saint. In his treatment of religious disputes he had nothing new to offer. To be sure he did not consider it necessary to attack heretics in his sermons; and indeed some of his fellow Catholics criticised him for the indulgence which he showed to the Protestants from the pulpit. But this forbearance of his was part of the tactics he always used in his attempt to round off the sharp edges and to go as far as possible to meet the men of his age. When, however, this psychological approach did not produce the desired results, his friendliness changed to profound aversion. All his life he felt a violent antipathy to the city of Geneva.

It is somewhat irritating to perceive, in the missionary work of Francis de Sales, none of that infinite kindness which led him to do everything else from love and not compulsion, and which is known by his own maxim: "Too indulgent or too little indulgent—both of these are wrong. It is hard for us men to hold to the middle course; but were I to fail, I would rather it were from too much gentleness than too much rigour."<sup>8</sup> We can only understand this disturbing perception by understanding the fact that Francis de Sales was not the simple personality he has been so often made out to be. He was a curious figure, in whom a stubborn will dwelt strangely beside a great mildness of character, and in this he bears a certain resemblance to the Russian. What we must note principally is that he was not, in the beginning, the friendly person for which he will always be honoured. With his Latin temperament, he was an impulsive man, and precisely because he was not evenly tempered by nature, steadiness was an alluring ideal for which he longed with all his soul. He wrought unceasingly upon himself to such effect that he finally achieved that gentleness which is his characteristic, and which makes his personality so attractive. The wealth of spiritual exertion he used is betrayed by his answer to the demand that he should show some resentment at a wrong which had been done him: "Would you, then, that in the space of a quarter-of-an-hour I should lose the little bit of gentleness which it has taken me twenty years of arduous toiling to win?"<sup>9</sup> At Chablais Francis de Sales had not yet reached this stage, for he was just at the outset of his career. Nor was he yet a Saint, although he was to become one in the course of his life. His conversion of the heretics of Chablais, as the figures show, can certainly be regarded as a draught of fishes. Yet, if we bear in mind how this catch was achieved we cannot add to it the epithet of miraculous as was the draught of fishes at the lake of Gennesaret, whereat the beholders were so astonished. Francis might at

best confess, with Simon: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

## III

Francis de Sales was a born fisher of men. The passion for converting and guiding men had already seized hold of him, and he could not rid himself of it. He indulged in it even more as coadjutor of the Bishop of Geneva, and also, after the latter's death, as his successor to the See. His second draught of fishes was, of course, accomplished in a different way. Instead of concentrating on converting heretics he now turned his attention to winning back men who had become uncertain and hesitant about the Church. Francis was preoccupied by the Catholics who belonged to the Church, but who in the turbulence of the age were out of harmony with his piety. He sought to be accepted by them, and to reinforce their shaky Catholicism. His aim was to haul in these apathetic believers.

In order to accomplish this Francis de Sales believed that a modification of Christian teaching was necessary. The Bishop of Geneva was sufficient of a Catholic to know that according to the teaching of his Church, Christianity represents unchanging and incorruptible greatness. But he also knew—as Cardinal Newman did later—that the teaching had developed a particular stamp of its own, and he endeavoured to re-establish the ideal of piety. He had maintained this thesis of a new ideal of piety for the first time in his *Philothea*, a name which means a "soul loving God"—that soul which, according to Tertullian, is Christian by nature. The *Introduction à la Vie Dévote*, as the work is called, arose out of letters which he addressed to his cousin's wife, Louise de Chastel. The latter had asked him to show her the way to holiness, and he subsequently published his letters to her in the form of a book. Both in form and in content this work was a literary accomplishment the fame of which soon spread far and wide, and which, by reason of its enduring consequences, marks an important event in the history of Christian piety. The *Philothea* was the principal net wherewith he made his second catch of fish. The sensation which the book caused in Catholic France is understandable, since its author was also a man of high artistic talents.

Francis de Sales' new ideal required the recognition that there were different forms of piety. Man can attain to Heaven by many paths, the Bishop of Geneva was wont to say, and the means whereby perfection may be achieved are various. Only narrow-minded Christians admit that there is only one way of practising piety—naturally their own; and Francis rejected this attitude as too restricted. Rather did the author of the *Philothea* expressly emphasise the multitude of religious potentialities: "Piety must necessarily take different forms: with those in high places it is different from what is practised by the daily labourers, it differs in princes and subjects, and it differs in young girls and married women or widows. Side by side with the general attitude to piety there are also the personal virtues, the employment, and the duties of the individual, which are an indication of the way to godliness. It would be most improper for

a bishop to live as a hermit, for nobles, like Capuchins, to renounce worldly goods, for craftsmen to spend the whole day in Church."<sup>10</sup> In the exercise of his religiousness a man must take into consideration the place, the society, and his position. What is suitable for one may be unsuitable for another. True piety is possible always, but it must be adapted to the circumstances. According to Francis de Sales there are as many ways to holiness as there are Saints.

Recognition that there are various ways of practising piety is not enough. Francis de Sales goes a step further and contends, as a corollary to this, that consequently the Christian is not able to attain perfection only through the cloister. Holiness is not the exclusive privilege of a small number of men who have withdrawn from the world: it is the established goal of all Christians. Francis sought to refute the prejudicial opinion that perfection could not be achieved by the ordinary people of the world. His view, which is very modern for the times in which he lived, was that religiousness can be realised in the midst of the everyday world, and that it harmonises with every essential aspect of life. Francis de Sales set himself the task of showing "those who live in the midst of the world, in the family circle, and even at court—those who are constrained to associate with men of the world, and precisely for this reason do not think of it—that it is possible for them to lead lives of godliness."<sup>11</sup> According to Francis there was a way of piety which the man of the world, too, might follow; and he claimed to know men who had lost holiness in their monasteries. Obviously, like all other Saints, Francis de Sales was a friend of solitude, and he regarded it as one of the most effective means of spiritual advancement. But this solitude is not to be found only in monasteries and the wilderness. Francis advocated that inward solitude into which, in the midst of his greatest activity, a man can withdraw. "And wert thou in the midst of the human turmoil, thou couldst still be alone, alone with thy God."<sup>12</sup> Never must worldly piety be less esteemed than religiousness, since, in the circumstances, it is much harder to practise than fleeing from the world. Piety in the world was the new ideal which Francis de Sales proclaimed; and he did it in such a lovable way that it has left an indelible impression on the memory of mankind. The boldness of his convictions can scarcely be assessed by modern man, for this piety ideal is like Columbus and the egg: once it had been stated, it was obvious to all the world. But to find the courage to speak out against the ascetic traditions, which had been established for centuries, required the greatness of a religious mind. The whole idea of all this was so new at that time that Bossuet regarded it as the Bishop of Geneva's most remarkable achievement: "Before Francis de Sales the spirit of Godfearing piety was almost entirely unknown to the ordinary people of the world. Francis de Sales was chosen to bring it out of its place of concealment, and to rescue men's minds from this fatal delusion. He reinstated piety in the world; but let no one think that he dressed it up to make it more acceptable in the eyes of the world."<sup>13</sup>

The consequence of universal godliness and piety was the rejection of the view which holds that religious activity can only take the form of

extravagant performances. This widely held notion, to which his new idea put an end, was combated continually by Francis de Sales. He was opposed to any unusual behaviour, which merely drew attention to itself. He had no time for anything that was outside the normal course of things and ecstasies played no part in his life. Unhappily true, indeed, was his pronouncement regarding the trend of the Christian Church: "We often long so much to become Angels, that we forget to be good men."<sup>14</sup> His counsel was always that we should be content with the circumstance and means which really are at our disposal and not hanker after any particular accomplishments, for this leads men only too readily to overweening presumption. As against what is out of the ordinary, he advocated simple behaviour in our daily life, without, however, falling into mediocrity. There is great wisdom to be found in these words of his: "All those little daily tasks of charity to others, that toothache, that unfriendliness and disregard shown by others, the irritable mood of your husband, or of your wife, a broken glass, a lost glove, the slight inconvenience of going to bed somewhat earlier and getting up earlier when you should go to church—in brief all manner of slight vexations, all these must be borne and accepted with love, for this pleases God exceedingly."<sup>15</sup> This emphasis on the insignificant is far from trivial; for by means of it Francis de Sales has shown the way which leads to universal piety. To serve God in His greatness calls for an occasion which seldom arises; but the Christian is able to prove his devotion to Him in the little matters of life every minute of the day.

The new ideal of godliness was also in contradiction to the view which held that the religious life was principally manifested by the ascetic practice of penance. Francis did not condemn asceticism. He too was able to commend self-mortification, and he regarded its value as beyond question. But he was able to prevail over that sombre asceticism which was winning a hold on mankind, and this must be regarded as a great achievement, when we reflect how self-flagellation had obsessed the Christian mind for centuries. The Bishop of Geneva knew that there was a kind of Christian piety which was not prejudicial to the senses, and this was his new ideal. Francis did not do this in order to repress the passions, but to transform and illuminate them. According to him, if human desires were given an exalted goal, they were able to be transmuted into virtues. He did not seek to suppress natural needs, since God Himself had instilled them into man. According to Francis de Sales Christianity would sanctify the world, not just raise it up. From this conviction flowed his refreshing naturalness, which has nothing affected about it, and which makes the reading of his works such a pleasant occupation. Many a time did he repeat the words of Jesus: "Eat such things as are set before you." From this he drew the inference that one should seek the favour of others without being always different from other men. He considered it quite compatible with piety and godliness to dress well, to go to the theatre and enjoy suchlike jollifications, although he warned against any form of excess in this. There was no true godliness for him in despising natural human

inclinations; it was to be found in the proper use of them in the course of a truly religious way of life.

Francis de Sales, moreover, would have none of your piety which goes about exhibiting a gloomy, woebegone countenance. He found such sights most unpleasant. Melancholy dejection was no sign of true piety to him, rather did it betoken the Devil. "Ill-considered sadness confuses the soul,"<sup>16</sup> and had to be resisted as an enemy. "I have told you before, and I write it again now, that I want no cranky, restless, gloomy, peevish, half-hearted piety, but one which is mild, gentle, pleasant and peaceful, in a word, which is free and merry-hearted: for this is loved by God and men."<sup>17</sup> It is obvious that Francis also knew that a man is not always master of his inclinations, and that he must not use them lightly. But spiritual despondency had to be resisted, just like scruples which would seek to establish the will of God by means of subtle researches, and having come to a conclusion begin to doubt whether they have chosen the correct answer. Francis de Sales was no lover of self-affliction, and he repeatedly stressed that "true piety is not a destructive, but a constructive, even a perfecting power in the world."<sup>18</sup> All gloomy reflections were contrary to his candid nature. To sadness he opposed joy again and again, and he gave Christians this exhortation: "Rouse up in your spirits the feeling of joy and gaiety, and hold fast to the belief that this is the true meaning of piety."<sup>19</sup> Francis de Sales was himself a cheerful man who aspired to an almost musical serenity; and in this lies the secret of his power of attraction. A saintly optimism filled this man, who believed that complete salvation was the principal truth of Christianity, and who believed also in the complete victory of light over darkness. According to his anthropology, the good core of man and the beauty of human nature had not been destroyed, despite original sin; and the state of innocence was far surpassed by the state of salvation.

The crowning achievement of Francis de Sales' ideal of piety was the creed of freedom and great-heartedness. He expressly refused to force others into his way of thinking, but was careful to leave everyone his own freedom. "God is not petty."<sup>20</sup> This recognition enabled Francis to be filled with a great-hearted love, which he used to enlarge the human heart. "Above all must holy freedom and greatness of heart predominate; we should have no other law, no other restraint but love," he wrote in one of his letters; and he held that it was "fighting for a good thing, when I advocate a holy, love-filled freedom of the spirit, which, as you know, I do especially honour: for it is something true, and far removed from the dissoluteness and licentiousness which are only the masks of freedom."<sup>21</sup> These words are no mere empty phrases in the mouth of the Bishop of Geneva. A great-hearted spiritual freedom really meant for this man something holy, and thanks to his perception of this he became one of the most radiant figures of the Church.

In connection with his new ideal of piety the problem soon arose of whether Francis de Sales was to be numbered among the great Saints. The author of the *Philothea* was not one of those spirits who are endowed

with a prodigal wealth of ideas. There were only a quite definite number of conceptions which continually recurred in Francis, and the scope of his views is soon surveyed. But he possessed something which was of far greater importance than the intellectual ability to devise a system: his ideal of piety pulsed with a rare warmth. Thanks to this the Bishop of Geneva was able to pronounce those new words for which his nation was waiting at that time. To him it was given to bring self-practising Catholicism nearer to life, and to bring to the ladies of France, especially, a finely elaborated Christianity which corresponded both to their lofty feelings and to their social setting. His godliness did not restrict itself to playing off the greatness of the past against the regrettable state of the present, rather did he seek to establish a positive relationship to the contemporary age. Because he knew how to make his religiousness worthy of men's love, and attractive as well, the *Philothea* was known as the Breviary for worldly minds: for it was written by a man who loved God *and* the world. Francis was himself granted the title of a man of the world among the Saints, and this sheds no ambiguous light upon the mould of his personality. His conciliatory nature was indeed most outstanding, and could scarcely have been any greater. With this ideal of piety throughout the world he went as far to meet the people of the world as he possibly could. In fact he even went to the utmost limit of what it was legitimate and right for him to do.

Francis de Sales' practice of piety in the world was, in its great-heartedness, too new to be able to meet with immediate success. Time was needed for this unusual ideal to be assimilated. Like everything new, moreover, this new interpretation of religion was at first disputed, since it cut right across the established tradition and appeared most extraordinary to the churchmen. Francis was charged with levity, and that he was not acquainted with Christian earnestness. When the *Philothea* appeared it was brought into disrepute on account of its attitude to morality; it was condemned in offensive terms and even burnt as a book which stirred up trouble. The views it advocated were set down as a relaxation of Christian discipline, and the author must have had to bear with many attacks. He was mocked at as the discoverer of how to get to Heaven by a path of roses without thorns. This rejection of him is not entirely unintelligible. "This victory through circumambulation" really was a highly unusual teaching, as was also its advice not to break down obstacles but rather to be free of them by thinking of them no more. What was one to think when the Saint said in all earnestness in the *Philothea*: "Dance and sing, albeit quietly, if discretion and judicious considerations do so counsel: perchance to bring delight to respectable company (!). For pleasure is the daughter of love. It turns apathy to goodness, and what is venturesome to what is permissible."<sup>22</sup> Naturally, in those days, anxious thinkers were taken aback by the dangerous boldness of this attitude, and the Bishop of Geneva was accused of frivolous complaisance, not to mention laxity. It is legitimate to ask whether Francis de Sales did not offer Christianity at too low a price. Had not his piety in the world become a soft-as-velvet piety for all, which in its indulgence, required no more exertion of man? Had not his

fishing-nets become all too big, so that there was even room in them for all the lukewarm Christians? Was there not at work in his philosophy of life, as the *Philothea* must be regarded, the influence of the Jesuitical teaching which he had received in Paris as a youngster? What a deep chasm separates this new ideal of a piety from the sublime earnestness of a Blaise Pascal, who lived through a night in Gethsemane in a way which terrifies one even to-day. An unbridgeable antithesis separates Francis de Sales, who sought to save what was natural, from Pascal, in whom holiness brought about a pitiless destruction of his geniality. There are few books which in their religious outlook show a greater contrast than the *Philothea* and the *Pensées*. Whoever has embraced the pessimistic Christianity of Pascal, with its spiteful hatred of the Ego, will only with the greatest mistrust be able to smooth over the religious optimism of Francis de Sales.

Nevertheless, these reflections are not all that remains to be said regarding the Bishop of Geneva and his new ideal of piety, which embodies a *noblesse religieuse* and seeks to point out to laymen the road to perfection. Although Francis was willing to meet people half-way in neutral matters, he remained as firm as a rock on fundamental questions, and was never silent out of pure politeness. We do the Bishop of Geneva wrong if we regard him as an opportunist, an opinion which has been voiced even by a Catholic.<sup>23</sup> Rather did he attempt to put into effect the principle of St. Paul, who became a Jew to the Jews, and a Greek to the Greeks; for he sought to be everything to everyone. The Bishop of Geneva had not simply adjusted himself to the course of events and made good use of his opportunity. He consciously tried to influence his age. But he did not do this in the same way as many Christians had done through the centuries, for whom life was controlled by the spirit. There is not a trace of this arrogant attitude to be found in him. He viewed life as God's great gift; and he was ever ready to learn and to be guided by it. This conception enables there to stream from his writings that sweet fragrance whereof we cannot breathe enough. In this he was akin to Goethe, who expressed a similar conception in the wisdom of his old age. Moreover, with Francis de Sales, in regard to his inspired gentleness, one must speak of a religious art of living, which is only rarely to be encountered. The author of the *Philothea* represents a warm religiousness which regards all the events of the world as glorified through the redemption of Christ. There is nothing superficial about this joyous interpretation, for the pessimism of sin is as "deep" as religious optimism. Not only does the heroism of this embody a wonderful perception: the superior serenity which understands holiness as the unfolding, and not the annihilation, of the deepest longing of the human heart, does so to an equal extent. Joy is more Christian than seriousness, for pure religious serenity has passed through seriousness and left it far behind. And although Francis de Sales' new ideal of piety cannot yet be regarded as holy, yet by means of it did he unquestionably find himself on the way to holiness.

The *Philothea* was successful in France. In this second fishing-haul the nets were filled so full that it was scarcely possible to pull them in. The

influence of Francis de Sales was great even during his lifetime, and after his death it became even greater. Christian France was permanently impressed with his writings, and the effect of them would have been even greater had they not been drowned by the struggles between Jesuitism and Jansenism. And yet his words were not in vain, for they bore fruit; and the most important of them may be briefly outlined here.

In seventeenth-century France religiousness was in peril of becoming a mere formula. More and more it threatened to become a thing of cold-blooded ritual. One turned to Christianity because morals and usage required one to do so. But it all had very little indeed to do with men's souls. Amongst the nobility Christianity was regarded purely from the viewpoint of courtly tradition. Francis de Sales recognised the mortal danger in which religion stood if it came to be considered purely as a matter of convention. To him piety was not a system the rules of which one observed as a reasonable matter of course. Yet he in no way sought to eliminate common sense and understanding, which he fully acknowledged. Reason, to him, was a gift of God which must be enforced, since reasoning "makes men Godlike."<sup>24</sup> But Christianity, according to him, was in the first instance a matter of feeling. Religiousness had to be based in man's emotional life, since "our spiritual life is that which our emotions stir up."<sup>25</sup> This is no mere sentimentalism. Sentiment need not be weak: in certain circumstances it can be strong and powerful. Moreover, the emotions are indispensable for a true living religiousness, which must not be allowed to freeze in the marble-cold of intellectualism. Such a warning as this was urgently needed in a France where the rationalism of Descartes was continually gaining favour. One of the principal endeavours of Francis de Sales was to reawaken the emotions in religious life and not to let the practice of piety degenerate into something conventional, but to let it penetrate with emotional warmth; and this was an endeavour which cannot be sufficiently highly regarded. From this arose his advancement of devotion to the Heart of Jesus, which, according to Miller's sensitive study of Francis de Sales, "became the favourite devotion of Catholicism, in which the Mysticism of the individual flows out over the whole of the Catholic world, the Mysticism of the people, that Mystical festivity which we celebrate when the first roses bloom and the pale narcissi and the snowy jasmin exhale their flowering dreams, and when the sun in the heavens flames down over the fragrant blossoming world. And this spiritual devotion is the smile from the countenance of Francis de Sales, which has remained within the Church. . . ."<sup>26</sup> It was his great feat to have given back emotional warmth to the French Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation. Fortunat Strowski is referring to this achievement in the title of his treatise: *Saint Francis de Sales and Religious Perception*. One can associate this endeavour with the baroque age, and not be in error. Francis de Sales was a baroque figure who paid tribute to his century. Even though we must consider him as the exponent of the emotionally stressed baroque, this in no way takes away from his achievement. He merely did what he was charged to do. Beneath his religious and emotional

sentiments lay the perception of the two ways of winning men for religion. According to Francis de Sales one may use rational arguments to show men the truth of Christianity, and one can employ the reasoning of the heart to win them to piety. The Bishop of Geneva was able to distinguish clearly between the two possibilities, since instead of mere agreement he finally won sympathy. He always set to work on the understanding through the heart, and regarded it as an art as great as it was rare to be able to penetrate to the heart without falling into sentimentality in the process. In order to find the way to the heart, Francis de Sales attempted to speak the language of the great and pure heart, for only the heart can speak to the heart. With this truly Christian endeavour did he take his place among the ranks of the Saints.

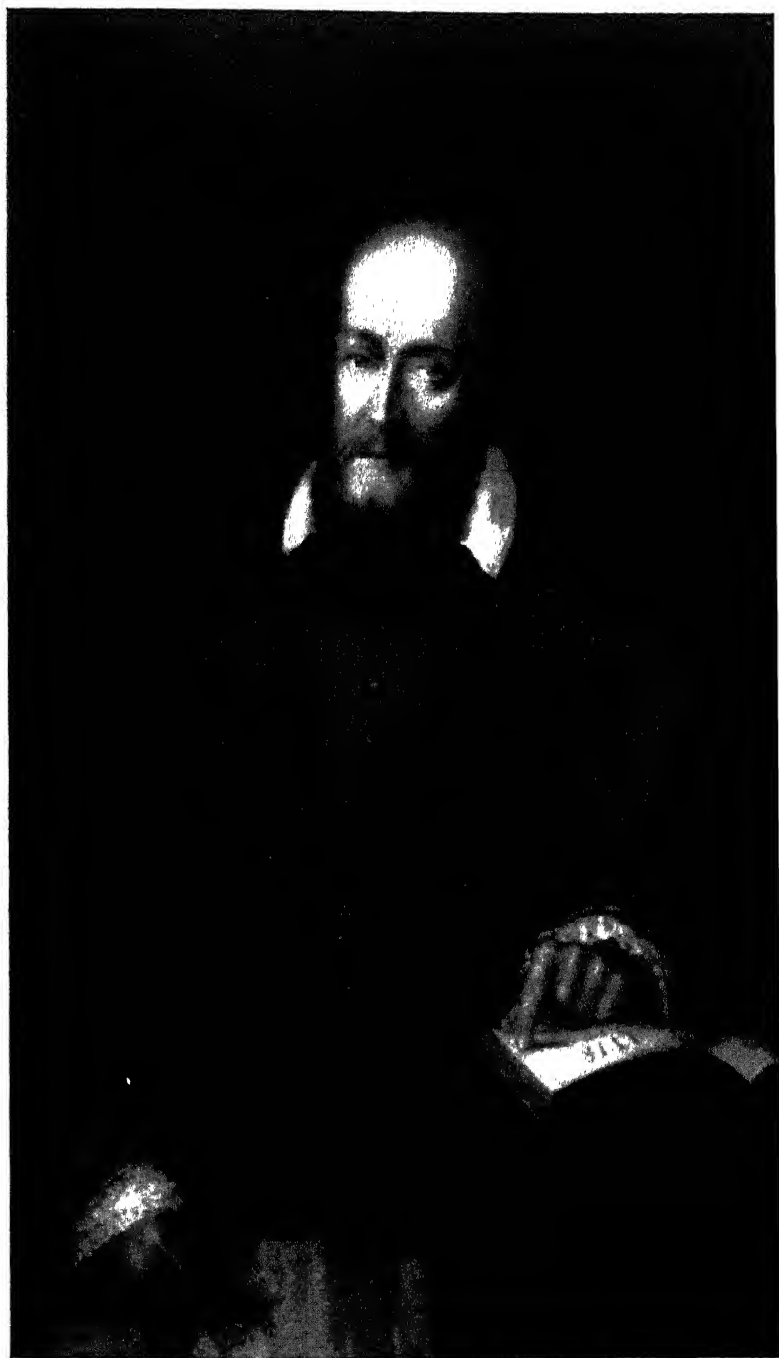
To this profoundly significant achievement he added a further feat which made the name of Francis de Sales immortal. The age in which he lived was in danger of witnessing the complete disintegration of Christianity. Another contributory factor to this state of affairs was humanism, which was always an ambiguous movement, and which did not bear the same stamp in the various western lands. The tendency, moreover, to consider humanism not as a scholarly movement which has given birth to modern natural science, but to regard it as a cultural movement which aimed at presenting the truth in beauty, was in danger of veering away from Christianity. As the result of its exclusive interest in man, the latter was used as a standard for measuring everything, and in the end this was bound to lead to an undermining of religiousness. The separation of Christianity and humanism was not to the advantage of either's greatness, for there is something central lacking in spiritual life when humanism is made to appear suspect, and, on the other hand, humanism abandons its western tradition when it renounces Christianity. Amongst the few men who saw clearly the grave consequences of this fateful development was Francis de Sales. His mental and spiritual structure was such that he belonged to both camps. As a Christian he was imbued with humanist culture, and he never disowned the humanist in himself. Moreover, even when he was not in agreement with humanism, he did not lose sight of its humanity, so that he was even able to quote, approvingly, the works of Montaigne, which were filled with restrained scepticism. But as a religious person Francis was firmly held prisoner by Christianity. He had devoted his life to it, and it must have hurt him to find that the two movements, to which he felt himself tied, were diametrically opposing each other. He could renounce neither Christianity nor humanism, nor did he believe that fundamentally they were contradictory. His compromising nature, which was dedicated to reconciling conflicting opinions, was fitted to attempt a union of both movements; he was continually on the look out for a synthesis of the two, and exerted himself towards this end. His new ideal of piety with its harmonising of the natural with the supernatural, with its union of the profane world and a striving for holiness, is, at heart, nothing less than a fusion of humanism and Christianity. Henri Bremond has aptly summed up Francis de Sales' objective as *humanisme dévot*.<sup>27</sup> A religiously

based humanism, emphasising that man is God's image and inspired with Christian strength, must be regarded as the great desire of Francis de Sales, for it sprang from his very soul.<sup>28</sup> In his attempt to make humanism useful to piety, the Bishop of Geneva was carrying still further the tradition of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Petrarch, and Erasmus. By means of his Christian humanism Francis de Sales was able to instil a new soul into the Catholic Church of seventeenth-century France. The realisation of a religious humanism is the abiding yield of his second catch of fish; and it is of a beauty scarcely inferior to the painting by Konrad Witz.

#### IV

Before Francis came to the last stage of his ascent his life passed through an interlude which was of the greatest significance in his individual development. This personal experience was his relationship to Jeanne de Chantal, the woman who will always be associated with his name. What these two human beings experienced together is of a uniqueness which can only be paralleled in the world of Saints. Friendly relations between man and woman are frequently to be encountered in the Saints. We have only to recall the association of Hieronymus and Paula, of Francis and Clare, of Theresa of Jesus and John of the Cross. The friendship of Francis de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal, however, is something new even among the Saints, and almost defies classification. It is scarcely of any interest to regard it as a mere curiosity, for this relationship at once sets the question of whether worldly love and religion really are inimical to each other. Does not ardent piety eliminate all manner of feeling for the other sex? Or does religiousness, in certain circumstances, exalt erotic love to its highest form? This problem finds a new and unexpected answer in Francis de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal.

The extraordinary experience which united these two Saints can only be understood if we bear in mind that Jeanne de Chantal also was a most remarkable person. As a feminine personality, which is not to be found every day in the "fineness of her spirit," we are forced to marvel at her spiritual life even more than at her engaging outward appearance. Francis de Sales saw in her "the perfect woman, for whom Solomon sought, but did not find, in Jerusalem."<sup>29</sup> She was a woman of violent energy and great religious interests. In order to overcome with some palpable proof the temptations against her faith, which, later, were to harass her continually, she used a red-hot iron to burn the name of Jesus on her breast, regardless of the blood which poured from the wound. Her almost masculine character showed itself in her attitude in face of the opposition of her entire family to her plan to enter a convent. Her fifteen year old son, when the moment of parting came, threw himself on her, weeping, and besought her to stay. Finding that all his words were in vain, he made one last attempt: he cast himself down across the threshold, saying, through his sobs, "Though I cannot keep you back, Mother, at least you shall only depart over the body of your son."<sup>30</sup> Jeanne was unable to contain her





tears, hesitated for a moment, and then stepped over the body of her child. It is undesirable to form too hasty a judgment of this religious drama. In the first place we must note that the words of Jesus, "he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me," became a prodigious reality in the life of this woman, and led her to cut through all the bonds of family. Only a religious and a heroic nature, like that of Jeanne de Chantal, could have acted in such a way.

The first acquaintance between Francis and Jeanne is as delightful as the beginning of a novel. "Who is this young fair-haired lady in widow's weeds, who sits opposite me during the sermon and heeds the words of truth so attentively?" the Bishop of Geneva wondered, and learned that it was the Baroness Jeanne de Chantal, who, at that time, was in her thirty-second year.<sup>31</sup> She was a beautiful woman with a full figure, quite free of arrogance, of a very lovable nature, with an attractive smile which played about her lips, and extremely intelligent. Jeanne de Chantal was, at that time, in a state of spiritual turmoil; her face was strained, and her eye was troubled. She had lost her husband, to whom she had been happily married, as the result of a hunting mishap. Thus it was when Francis de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal met each other, when their souls also were approaching the noontide of their existence. Although Francis normally desired that "religious ladies and gentlemen should always be the best-dressed members of society," he was strangely disturbed by the elegant, lace-trimmed dress worn by the Baroness, and he made an allusion to it. Jeanne at once adapted her attire in accordance with the wishes of Francis de Sales, and thereupon sought to be confessed by him. The ice was thus broken between them, and Francis later explained: "From the very moment when she began speaking to me from her soul, God gave me a great love of her spirit"; and for Jeanne there was soon no other happiness than "to be ever near to him."<sup>32</sup> The young widow now turned from the crude, harsh confessor who had guided her heretofore, although she was bound to him by a vow. She chose Francis as her new spiritual adviser, for he was much better suited to her fine sensibility and treated her with a frank informality which forms a sharp contrast to the behaviour of Aloysius, who, according to the oldest biographers, would not remain in the same room even with his mother. Francis had a fundamentally different outlook on women from that of the Italian Saint, who could only see a woman as a temptation from the Devil.

After a time there was another meeting, which brought matters to a head. Each of the pair had, in the meantime, contended before God in an attempt to establish whether their relationship was permissible, and they believed that they had received the Divine consent. When they were together in the room, the Baroness knelt down, made the confession of her life, and in a trembling voice, solemnly pledged herself to follow out Francis' instructions with a childlike obedience, whereby he acquired absolute authority over her. Francis de Sales thereupon promised always to guide her in love, and at the same time gave her the vow which bound his soul to Jeanne for ever. In a faltering voice which clearly betrayed his

inner agitation, he declared his resolve to her, and the pact between their souls was completed. They then went together into the church, and Francis read the Mass: "At the moment of transubstantiation they laid their vows in God's hands, and, as the basis of their love, consecrated to God, they renewed their vows of eternal chastity."<sup>33</sup> Immediately after the Mass Francis set the vow down in writing and gave the paper to Jeanne, who, from that day forth, always wore it in a little bag which hung from her neck. Through the vow of chastity, Jeanne was indissolubly united to Francis, and he need fear no more that he might lose her to another man. Unearthly bliss filled their hearts, and each remembered that day as the most momentous day of their lives. It was a spiritual marriage which they had gone through at St. Claude. Only in the baroque age could a bishop have possibly had such an experience, as Michael Müller has so pertinently observed in his book, *The Friendship of Francis de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal*, and it is not easily conceivable to the Catholicism of the present day.

Since the two Saints did not, in the first place, reside in the same town, a copious interchange of letters was conducted between them, whereof, unfortunately, only a part still survives. Jeanne de Chantal destroyed most of her own letters, and when the letters of Francis de Sales were to be published she wished all "words of love" to be struck out.<sup>34</sup> The first line of the surviving letters, however, set the tone which informs them all: "God, so it seems to me, has given me to you; whereof I am more certain every hour."<sup>35</sup> The customary and conventional address, "*Madame*," soon disappeared and gave way to the warmer greeting of "My very dear Sister," which, in turn, was superseded by "My dear, my incomparably dear Daughter." Nor was Francis any longer addressed by Jeanne de Chantal as "*Monseigneur*," for he regarded himself as the "Son of her Heart." The manifestation of his love, which was not restricted merely to loving forms of address, is in no way to be judged as being removed from a delicacy of spirit, for such delicate tenderness is one of the noblest and rarest qualities of man. Many a time did Francis de Sales' feelings burst forth, and then he would "give a free rein to his love." He would then write "breathlessly"; and yet find not enough strong words for his love: "I cannot say what my heart said, for you know that hearts have a secret speech, which only they do understand."<sup>36</sup> Francis assured the Baroness that his heart was with her "a thousand times a day"; the letters became even more copious, and spoke a language, which, as regards clarity, leaves nothing to be desired: "Oh God, my very dear Daughter, I do protest, and do so with all my heart, which belongs to you more than to me, that I feel a lively privation since I am unable to see you to-day. . . . And so, Good-night, my Daughter, wholly mine! Would that I might describe to you the feeling which came over me at Communion to-day regarding our union: it was something great, perfect, inward, mighty, and almost like a solemn vow and consecration."<sup>37</sup> The feeling which, by his own account, Francis entertained for Jeanne, was "powerful, unchanging, immeasurable, unconditional, sweet, free, wholly pure, completely serene—in brief, if I do

not delude myself, utterly in God."<sup>38</sup> Jeanne also felt the same feeling for Francis: she would joyfully have given everything in the world to have dwelt as a servant in his house in order to hear all the words spoken by his lips. After the manner of a woman, she was often unable to suppress her rapturous enthusiasm for the Bishop, and it was only when her admiration became too violent that Francis would check her.

The relationship which bound these two Saints together rested also on a material basis which was manifested in their common work. Francis de Sales had busied himself with the idea of founding an Order for those women who thirsted to sacrifice themselves in order to achieve perfection, but, by reason of their frail constitutions, were unable to assume the hardships of convent life. Francis de Sales envisaged a bold union of the world and the cell, in which individual sanctity and efficacious love should be united, and in which assistance should be rendered to the sick and the needy, in place of nightly penance. These lady visitors, who were to lead both a contemplative as well as an active life, would put into effect, in their own way, Francis de Sales' new ideal of piety. Jeanne de Chantal felt at once that her widowhood would, thanks to this plan, take on a new meaning, and she threw herself with enthusiasm into the projected founding of an Order. She installed herself at Annecy, in which city Francis' episcopal residence was situated, and together with him, founded the Order of Visitation. Francis' idea of a religious life without a cloistered existence was at that time too new-fangled to be properly understood. Only another Saint who was very well disposed towards him, Vincent de Paul, was able to realise this great project. Owing to ecclesiastical pressure Francis had to modify his precepts, and his Congregation was transformed into a restricted Order, in which the Visitants devoted themselves principally to the education of young girls. Thanks to the unwearying exertions of Jeanne de Chantal this modified Order of Visitation rapidly expanded, and it has shown itself right down to the present day as a vital and vigorous institution.<sup>39</sup>

In the relations which obtained between Francis and Jeanne, the active part was not the exclusive privilege of the Bishop of Geneva. Naturally he was in the first place the leading member of the partnership, but Jeanne was too vigorous a personality to resign everything to him as a matter of course. As with every enduring relationship there was a mutual giving and taking. Furthermore, Francis de Sales had discovered new possibilities in himself through his association with Jeanne de Chantal; she awakened strength in him which had so far lain dormant, and which was of the greatest importance for the completion of his spiritual life. In a Carmelite convent at Dijon Jeanne de Chantal became acquainted, through the Prioress, a certain Anna of Jesus, one of Theresa of Avila's favourite pupils, with the mystical way of prayer. That inward, spiritual prayer, which consists of a wordless breathing of love in the immediate presence of God, was felt by Jeanne de Chantal as the fulfilment of her longing, and she hastened to tell Francis de Sales of this revelation of utter joy. The Savoyard Saint at first held himself aloof from this, and only with mis-

givings did he embark upon inward, spiritual prayer. But he finally embraced this mystical prayer and it became an essential part of his life. Francis reached the heights by the way of mysticism, and it was Jeanne de Chantal who had shown him the path.

With the abundant mutual assistance with which they provided each other the partnership of Francis and Jeanne strove onwards towards its goal. Francis cared for Jeanne with an attentiveness which many a husband lacks. He never allowed the spiritual needs of her feminine soul to go unheeded, as Abélard had so shamefully done in the case of the noble Héloïse, not to mention Konrad Marburg's pathological conduct to the deeply religious Elisabeth of Thuringia. Regarding the concrete question of whether a kiss was permissible in friendship, the Bishop of Geneva did not evade the issue, but with his attractive frankness replied that kissing was a manifestation of sensual emotion, but that when it was a symbol of spiritual love it should in no way be regarded as a reprehensible act. "Jacob kissed Rachel by the well, and yet they were both still models of chastity," observed Francis de Sales.<sup>40</sup> Certainly Jeanne was never consumed by disappointment or rendered unhappy in her association with Francis. The author of the *Philothea* was much too well acquainted with the feminine soul not to be aware of the fact that woman's deepest longing is for fulfilment, in which state love will be at one with the beloved. This fulfilment, moreover, he granted her, so that their souls drew ever closer together, and he did not permit himself to hold back anything which was in his heart from her heart. He avowed openly the impossibility of "separating Mine and Thine, in all that concerns us."<sup>41</sup> He spoke of the Baroness' children as "our children," and assured her: "I regard these children as mine, since they are yours."<sup>42</sup> He never read the Mass without thinking of Jeanne.<sup>43</sup> Even the phrase "holy union" occurs, and in the end, to their exceeding jubilation, they achieved the perfect fusion of their souls: "Both in thought and will, even in everything are they one and are my very essence."<sup>44</sup> Francis even ventured to write these intoxicating words to Jeanne: "God has given me 'an helpmeet,' who is not only 'like' me, but who is one with me, so that she and I are one only spirit."<sup>45</sup> And to the beloved the happy knowledge of identity was at last communicated: "You are truly myself, and I in truth am yourself."<sup>46</sup>

This intoxicating feeling of union could not be surpassed in its indescribable intensity. As a necessary reaction to this dizzy ascent, a descent was bound to ensue. The retrograde movement in their relationship was interdependent on the Spanish mysticism to which Jeanne de Chantal had introduced the Bishop of Geneva. The subsidence had nothing at all to do with a spiritual estrangement, for the deep sympathy which united the two remained quite unchanged. But under the influence of the writings of Theresa of Jesus the ideal of renunciation of everything which is not God began to exercise an ever more powerful attraction on Francis de Sales. Accordingly, Francis desired of Jeanne a release from their tender spiritual communion, and in this respect did their relationship have to undergo its severest test. Jeanne, out of sheer womanliness, struggled

against the merciless mortification, for she still regarded her union with Francis as the dearest thing on earth. The swift sequence of letters in which Francis besought this great sacrifice, struck at her like the repeated blows of a club. When one of them pierced into the inmost spirit of wounded humanity, Jeanne cried out aloud: "My God, my true Father, how deeply is the sharp knife thrust in. . . O God, how easy is it to forsake everything around one, but to forsake the skin, the flesh and the bone to the inmost marrow, which, as it seems to me, we did, that is something great, difficult, and impossible to accomplish without the Grace of God."<sup>47</sup> Yet Francis de Sales did not enter into the tragedy which was being played out in Jeanne's soul. He answered only with the most profound of questions: "When will this be ended, when will love no longer seek to be together, no more desire outward signs and manifestations, but be utterly satisfied with the unchanging, immutable knowledge, which God always gives?"<sup>48</sup> According to the mild Francis de Sales God requires this denudation since He will only dwell alone in the hearts of those whom He has chosen. "Think no more on the friendship, nor on the union which God did make between us,"<sup>49</sup> wrote Francis to Jeanne, who was left, weeping, behind, but who worked loyally with him until his death.

It is not easy to find the right word to describe this relationship, which is a phenomenon unique in the history of the Saints. Here again one cannot help feeling a vague misgiving about Francis de Sales, even though not in the sense of a sexual suspicion. Francis described his love for Jeanne as "whiter than the snow and purer than the sun."<sup>50</sup> The spotless purity of this friendship, in which sex played no part, need not detain us for long. Whoever makes the closer acquaintance of Francis de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal will not doubt for an instant, for both personalities reflect this purity in the clearest possible way. Rather is it the more astonishing that two human beings should have reached their goal of becoming as one, precisely when the sexual aspect was excluded. But whether there is a physical or a spiritual fusion is, in the end, purely a difference of the means used, not of the goal achieved. Francis experienced the mystery of love in a human being, filled with bliss, and this was the summit of his relationship with Jeanne. Moreover, in the face of this fact, the question cannot be repressed as to whether he had not surreptitiously taken something which, as a priest, was forbidden him: union with a woman's soul. Did he not share with Jeanne that *unio mystica*, which the Saints only experience with God? Probably it was the perception of these reflections which finally led him to withdraw from the state of identity. We are fully justified in giving expression to these doubts, but we must also bear in mind that it was Francis de Sales' finely sensitive conscience which created in him the intensity of the relationship. It is by this recognition of the extraordinary complicatedness of his soul that we realise that he cannot be measured by normal standards.

At any rate, the great value of this extremely subtle relationship must not be overlooked. The interlude in the life of Francis de Sales does at least provide a new answer to the question of the meaning of friendship

for human beings. The ever-present theme of friendship was at all times of a burning interest to Francis, and it occupied a large part of his thoughts. For him it set the problem of whether man can find that soul with which, united in feelings of sympathy, he can possess the same spiritual interests, and with which, like David and Jonathan, he can exchange raiment—or whether all this is forbidden to man and he must always go through life spiritually alone. Francis de Sales was a man predestined for Christian friendship. With this French Bishop of the baroque age, it had again that warmth which enabled him to write: "Nor is there any friendship which is not also an assimilation, a fusion, and an intermingling."<sup>51</sup> For Francis it was a loving friendship which bound him to Jeanne. He had understood that friendship is a most rare talent which is rarely granted, and then only to men to whom it is more blessed to give than to receive. The peculiar love-friendship of Francis de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal is like a spiritual minuet for which a Handel might have written the music, on which all the Angels curiously gazed, and which it would be vain to emulate. One false step, and both would have fallen into the abyss. They remained there before it, knowing that their friendship would lead them to the perfection of their religiousness, since they never regarded it as an end in itself. It always meant to them a mutual assistance into the spiritual realm. Francis experienced friendship as a bridge into eternity and it helped him in the most vigorous manner to draw near to the Divine. The true communion of friendship is a priceless religious boon, of which Nietzsche wrote: "There is to be found here and there on the earth a kind of continuation of love, in which the greedy desiring of two persons for each other has been softened into a common, loftier thirsting for an ideal which stands above them: but who is acquainted with this love? Who has experienced it? Its proper name is friendship."<sup>52</sup>

## V

"Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught." These words of Jesus' may be taken as the motto which describes the last phase of the life of Francis de Sales. He no longer remained on the brink of the shore, but betook himself filled with his new resolve, up to a height which is but rarely scaled, and which brought him such a catch of fish that it retains its significance even to-day.

For Francis de Sales, intercourse with living men was always in the foreground. This need had already led him to the cure of souls, which he continued to practise throughout his life. The guidance of souls must be noticed as a specific grace, and he was already being called the founder of modern spiritual guidance. He possessed an intimate knowledge of the human heart, which amazes one again and again; and he enjoyed a psychological understanding which is not often to be found. He was as familiar with the distressing decline of the soul through fruitless pleasures, as he was with the indescribable bliss which lies in finding God. Whoever possessed the intuitive ability to read the hearts of men to such a degree,

and to assume the burdens of their souls, was clearly predestined to the unlearnable art of leading souls. And this art Francis practised both orally and in his writings. To be sure, his first spiritual letter was stiff and awkward, but in the end he became so adept that his personal writings became the most valuable part of his works.

With an undercurrent of commiseration Francis de Sales' cure of souls has been represented purely as a consolation for the dissatisfied hearts of women. Such a view reveals an ignorance of the facts. The cure of women's souls is not a thing to be held in slight esteem, for women are the mothers of posterity. Moreover he did not only indulge in feminine conversations with them, for he knew how to use great energy when needful. As a connoisseur of the female heart, Francis de Sales knew exactly how to talk to women—firmly but not harshly, kindly but not sentimentally. In his opinion the unfathomable heart of woman conceals far more secrets than that of man, and with the imaginative forbearance of which the author of *Philothea* was master, he did not think, in view of his sympathy for love, of simply stifling it, but rather of leading it on to the right path. For the rest his spiritual letters are, for the most part, addressed to religiously inclined women, but they contain such a wealth of shrewd observations and wise counsels in spiritual conduct that they also have very much to say to men.

Francis de Sales knew extremely well how to bring words of comfort to men without arousing in them the feeling that someone was preaching to them. He took the human soul seriously, and treated it objectively. "Let yourselves be led by God, and do not think too much of yourselves."<sup>53</sup> The Bishop of Geneva did not think it well to assess the soul always by its progress, rather did he advocate that it should be left to God. Too great a preoccupation with itself is just as injurious as are many idle amusements, among which Francis de Sales counted haphazard reading. Only when a man concentrates on the singleness of mind which is needful, and loyally perseveres along this course, can he attain that state which Francis called "the happy medium." Above all else, Francis possessed the gift of being able to infuse fortitude into men to an exceptional degree. Again and again he warned his spiritual children against the belief that perfection could be assumed as easily as putting on a ready-made garment. "We do not need to be perfect men," he wrote, "but we seek to be perfect"; and he once observed, "We must, in order to achieve perfection, apply ourselves with as much exertion as is the will of God—but at the same time, we must leave the caring for our perfection to God."<sup>54</sup> We must not lose heart if we do not quickly reach the highest level of virtue; in order to achieve holiness man must be prepared to attack the task again and again. "There is no better way of perfecting one's spiritual life, than beginning it over and over again, and never thinking that one has already done enough."<sup>55</sup> Francis de Sales once likened the soul to the works of a clock, which need to be constantly wound up, oiled and cleaned. "The practice of cleansing, of perfecting ourselves should end only with our lives. Nor have we any reason to be downhearted at our shortcomings, for our way

to perfection is really nothing but a continual struggle against sin."<sup>56</sup> The goal can only be reached after a long, slow process, and not from one day to the next. One should not be too distressed at occasional relapses, even as one would not set aside the lute after noticing a false note. One suffers continual defeats on this earth, and yet in mortal life the good is always intermingled with the evil. For this reason Francis constantly counsels patience, above all with oneself. "We must endure others, but above all ourselves; and we must be patient with our own imperfections."<sup>57</sup> We should not abuse our own spirit too much if it does not at first succeed in overcoming its evil ways, nor should we mortify it continually. Wonderful indeed are his arguments: "Humility which does not engender fortitude is unquestionably false humility. True humility indeed declares: I can do nothing, for I myself am nothing. But then it at once gives way to fortitude which says: There is nothing, and there cannot be anything I may not do if I but place my trust in Almighty God."<sup>58</sup> These few indications are enough to show that the spiritual precepts of Francis de Sales are not out of date even to-day. There is something timeless about them, since the human heart remains essentially the same throughout the ages.

Francis de Sales was singularly well suited for the guidance of souls because he had constantly before him a definite ideal to which he sought to lead those who would follow his directions. This objective, through its deep penetration into the life of the Saints, and through its leaning towards mysticism, assumed with increasing distinctness the form of the love of God. Indeed he had already given to the lady to whom his first book was addressed the name of "God-loving soul." To Francis, piety was an exalted love of God, which, moreover, he sought to have distinguished from those "sweet feelings and words of comfort, and the gentle emotions of the heart, which lead only to tears and sighs."<sup>59</sup> But the central argument of his ideal of the love of God is rather to be seen in his second principal work, to which he gave the title of *Traité de l'Amour de Dieu*—also called *Theotimus*—and which he wrote expressly for Jeanne de Chantal. It was a great step forward from the first to the second book, in which years of spiritual toiling may be presumed. The twelve books of Francis de Sales' comprehensive work contain his intellectual theories, his logic, his philosophy, and his theology, all pervaded with an intentionally gentle light. In its deepest essence the *Theotimus* is a song which cannot be analysed. It is not intended for the masses, but like all pure mysticism is a book for the few. According to his preface, he sought to pass beyond the *Philothea* and applied himself to those advanced souls which he wished to lead to an even higher stage of mysticism. For Francis de Sales "prayer and mystical theology are one and the same,"<sup>60</sup> whereof the principal practice is to speak with God and to hear Him speaking in one's own heart. In the *Theotimus* the Bishop of Geneva, following the path of Theresa of Jesus, taught of indescribable "fusion of the soul into God"<sup>61</sup> with its infinite sweetness which is never to be forgotten. His whole mysticism is nothing more than love; for as he himself said: "Love is the substance of all theology."<sup>62</sup> Francis de Sales had begun singing the "song of holy love,"

and finally reached the pitch where he was able to say, in practical life: "One should not ask for my counsel, for I am blessed on the side of love."<sup>63</sup> They are magnificent words which Francis has written about the love of God, for it surged through him to a remarkable degree, and brought him to the perception that "true love knows no method."<sup>64</sup> If we try to dig up the roots of Francis de Sales' mystical love of God, we come across Catherine of Genoa, the Saint with her maternal countenance and heart filled with love, whom the author of the *Theotimus* had studied minutely, and whose praise he thus proclaimed: "For God's sake tell me who loved God more: the theologian, William of Ockham, who has been called one of the most sagacious of all men, or Saint Catherine of Genoa, a woman with no learning? The former knew Him rather through speculation, the latter through experience; and her experience took her much further forwards into seraphic love, while the other, with all his learning, remained far behind her phenomenal perfection."<sup>65</sup>

This mystical dissolving of the soul into God is manifested outwardly by a clearly defined bearing of holiness, to which Francis de Sales sought to train men up, and which he has summed up in words which have become famous: "What do you conceive it is that I have been able to impress so deeply upon you, so that you do conscientiously obey me in your everyday life? Nothing but these two phrases, which I have so often commended to you: Require nothing, refuse nothing. With this I have said all I have to say."<sup>66</sup> One can scarcely imagine a more illuminating definition of what true holiness is than this utterance, which Francis de Sales repeated more than once. The motto of asking for nothing and denying nothing is to be encountered the more often in him, since it is a conscious end in itself. It is profitable to reflect at length upon this brief formula of Francis, not as a moral maxim, which it is not, but because its substance is a definition of holiness. The Christian, striving towards God, must be content with what God has appointed for him, and wait for what else He may bestow upon him. Equally important is the second precept to "refuse nothing," meaning that no one is to be refused anything, no request denied, and oneself to be poured out in giving. It was this same formula, "Require nothing, refuse nothing," which had been the old Stoic ideal, and which reappeared in the Bishop of Geneva. It is indeed a highly stoical conception; and Stoicism has, moreover, a core of truth which is not far removed from Christianity, as may be seen from the writings of Saint Paul. In conformity with his religious humanism Francis de Sales attempted to extract the elements of truth from Stoicism, and to embody them into his new ideal of piety. Yet the result was in no way merely another form of the old Stoicism. Francis had no time for men who are callously indifferent to events, and he wrote: "The vainglorious insensibility of those who will not admit that one is human has always seemed quite fanciful to me."<sup>67</sup> Francis de Sales was not advocating the old pagan apathy and indifference towards life in his ideal of attaining holiness by requiring nothing and refusing nothing. With him, it was rather Christian serenity which formed the theme, and this is something fundamentally different. Only one who always remains within

the true melody of constant serenity can achieve that spiritual attitude of resignation which, in the midst of all the vicissitudes of life on earth, retains the most profound peace. Only the Christian who strives hard to ask nothing of God and to deny nothing to man, can rise above the things of life. He will possess that higher strength, which springs from God, and which, as spiritual greatness, is equal to all situations. But this sublime condition cannot be achieved out of one's own natural strength, since it arises only out of an intense love of God.

The man who demands nothing and withholds nothing experiences that quiet spiritual happiness which is to be found in the last stage of perfection. This evenness of the mind is never lost, and is alone able to overcome the unending turmoil of the human heart. Francis de Sales regarded restlessness as an emotion which came from the lower part of the soul, and believed that it should be resisted as the Devil himself. He took great care to remain tranquil and unruffled, to begin the morning in an even-tempered frame of mind, and throughout the day to allow himself to be overcome by no inward or outward disturbance. This precious spiritual tranquillity could, according to Francis, only be found by the man who lived in conformity with the precept to wish for nothing and to refuse nothing. And only by means of this peace of mind could he achieve his goal of spiritual equanimity. It is only by attaining to this that a man may no longer be cast out of his inward quietude. "What could possibly perturb our peace? Truly, although everything were upside down, it would not disconcert me. For what is the whole world worth in comparison with the heart's peace?"<sup>68</sup> Francis de Sales had once, like Augustine, prized the restlessness of men's hearts, which know no rest on Earth until they are finally steeped in the fresh water of eternal life, as something wonderful. But when he was able to dissolve his soul in God he had found that peace which surrenders to Providence with closed eyes, and to this he devoted the very greatest care. Francis de Sales writes of the "holy peace" in which the soul, "remains in the deepest silence, nor speaks any word, neither weeps nor sobs, nor sighs, nor stirs, and does not even pray."<sup>69</sup> From now on, the Bishop of Geneva regarded the best prayer as that in which one is engrossed in God, in which one thinks neither of oneself nor of the prayer itself, where, in a mysterious language of silence, heart speaks to heart in a way which no one but the holy lovers can understand. Francis de Sales has frequently given expression to this great objective of "peace in agitation, in which movement too is peace,"<sup>70</sup> and perhaps his most enduring description of it is to be found in that clear-sighted letter to Jeanne de Chantal in which he declared: "Do but remain with God in a state of quiet and gentle spiritual tension, and in soft slumbering in the arms of Providence, in quiet surrender to His holy will: for all this is pleasing unto Him. Guard against all intellectual exertion, for this is harmful in prayer, and labour with your affections about the Subject of your love as softly as you are able. From time to time, the power of your intellect will return to the attack; and yet at the moment of perceiving this, one must return to simple acts of will. Once one has reached the presence of God one stays there always.

One does not look on Him nor speak of Him; one remains quite simply there where one has been placed by God, like a statue in its niche. When the perception is in harmony with this simple remaining before God, so that we belong to Him, then should we thank God for His goodness.—If a statue in its niche could speak and one were to ask it, 'Why are you there?' Then it would reply, 'Because the sculptor put me there.' 'Why do you not move?' 'Because he wishes me to remain motionless.' 'What profit do you think you derive from this?' 'I am not here for the sake of my own profit, but for that of my master, and to serve and do his will.' 'But you do not even see him!' 'No,' the statue would reply, 'but he sees me, and takes pleasure in so doing; that is why I am where he has placed me.' 'But would you not like the strength to move and to be able to draw nearer to him?' 'No, only if he should command it.' 'Have you then no desire at all?' 'No, for I am where my master has placed me; his pleasure is the only satisfaction of my being.'"<sup>71</sup> In these sentences expression is given to the quietist mysticism of France, among the founders of which we may count Francis de Sales. A few years later quietism fell into ill-repute in France, as a consequence of the troubles connected with Madame de Guyon, but at this time it was spiritually trustworthy. The undistorted ideal of holy quiet, which has nothing at all to do with inactivity or indolence as we may see from the life of Francis de Sales himself, is one of the highest achievements of Christian religiousness. Utter peace of the soul in God was the result of Francis de Sales' last endeavour, and for this the description of "the miraculous draught of fishes" is fully justified: for in the face of it one can only be filled with a deep, religious awe.

Francis de Sales' utterances on spiritual peace are radiant with a Divine light, for they do not give expression to purely theoretical demands. The Bishop of Geneva was not one of those moralists whereof the Church has always boasted an abundance, and who can never do more than tell men what they must do. With Francis we find a living embodiment of what he taught, and the perception of this imbues his personality with the true character of holiness. In the end he was the incarnation of that soul at peace in God which requires nothing and refuses nothing. This was observed by all who had personal dealings with him, and most expressively, of course, by Jeanne de Chantal: "He said that the true way to serve God was to be led by Him, and to follow Him in the soul without any support of comfort, of feeling, or of light, save for simple, naked belief. Thus did he ever love loneliness, tribulations and despair. He told me once he cared little whether he were comforted or comfortless. If Our Lord made reasonable demands of him, he accepted them in all simplicity. And if not, he thought nothing of it. But in truth normally he enjoyed great spiritual sweetness. One saw this in his face, if he withdrew only a little into himself, which he often did."<sup>72</sup> This superior serenity was not his by nature. The Savoyard Saint, by virtue of his talents, was clearly not one of those men whose veins are filled with water instead of blood. Moreover, he was a Frenchman, possessed of a violent temperament. He had to bear with storms and turmoil, and by his own admission he had the most lively

emotions: "There is, as I believe, no soul in the world who loved more heartily, more tenderly, and, to speak frankly, more infatuatedly than I did; for it pleased God to make my heart like that."<sup>73</sup> Love and anger were the two qualities which it cost him the most effort to master. Francis struggled with his passions until he achieved dominion over them, and his soul attained that peace in God which has made such an indelible impression of gentleness on all other men, and which is only another indication of the attitude of "require nothing, refuse nothing." There is indeed scarcely a word to which one recurs so often with him as the word "gentleness." To him it embodied the spirit of Christ, and he regarded it as boundless. Through his prolonged spiritual struggles Francis belonged to that type of transfigured gentleness which is the pure expression of holiness; and in the end his life became a visible embodiment of the words of the Lord: "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth." Regarding this mildness in strength the great Fénelon, who was steeped in the spirit of the author of *Theotimus*, has rightly observed that it flowed from Francis' heart into his own, in order to make it gentle and peaceful. In the face of this "law of mildness," to which Francis de Sales has given expression with such beauty as the founder of it, we may really speak of the Bishop of Geneva as a true Saint, who fully merited the highest title bestowed upon him by the Church: Doctor of Perfection.

Gerhard Tersteegen

1697—1769

I

THE SAINT, as a Christian phenomenon, is to be encountered also in Protestantism. It is no personal whim to make Saints of Protestant men. Rather is it a view which is based on real necessity. Even in the opinion of Erasmus of Rotterdam, moreover, there are several Saints who do not figure in the calendar. To these there undoubtedly belong many great Protestants on whom the title of "holy men" clearly thrusts itself. Friedrich Oberlin, the remarkable pastor of the Steintal in Alsace, has already been included among the Saints in Protestantism, and the title has also been applied to Christoph Blumhardt. The arresting personality of Heinrich Pestalozzi, also, reminds one in many ways of a Saint, if his life is carefully regarded in a new light. All these observations spring from the profound conviction that holy men appear in Protestantism also, and that they have been considered all too little in this sense. It was this same conviction which led the Swedish Archbishop, N. Söderblom, who was deeply rooted in Lutheranism, to pronounce the view, in his last work, that "the idea of the Saint is so important, and is so utterly neglected by evangelical Christianity, that it requires very special treatment."<sup>1</sup> If, in place of the neglect of long years, there were a new understanding of those great figures who led the lives of Saints within Protestantism, then would there indeed be nothing less than a second spring.

The honour of being regarded as a Protestant Saint is undoubtedly the due of Gerhard Tersteegen most of all. Not only can the title be applied to him without any forcing of the judgment; he cannot be adequately understood from any other point of view. He is a Saint within the Protestant Church. With a rare purity he embodied the nature of the holy man who conceives Christianity as the communication of existence, which calls for an appropriate configuration of life. According to him "the descriptions of life, the sayings, the works, and the sufferings of the Saints must find their fulfilment again and again within us."<sup>2</sup> Tersteegen strove with all his might for the perfection of his soul. He sought to come as near to God as was possible. His own problem was that of the personification of the Saint within the Protestant faith. This, Tersteegen's greatest endeavour, has been overlooked even down to the present day, and for this reason he has not been depicted in the light which alone is worthy of him. All attempts to fit Tersteegen into a historical intellectual category will break down if his spiritual endeavour is not taken into account. Irritation over his

"anomalous appearance," which does not dovetail into the general picture which official ecclesiastical history paints of Protestantism, springs precisely from the failure to regard him in the one true light. Tersteegen cannot be considered as either the beginning of a new epoch, or as the end of a phase. Like all the Saints, he stands apart from the events of time, and faces towards Eternity. At his burial Rector Hasenkamp called Tersteegen "a great Saint,"<sup>3</sup> who had been given to the decadent Church. This honour, which has scarcely ever been bestowed upon a Protestant, was unfortunately not sufficiently remarked upon, otherwise men would certainly have appreciated the extraordinary position of Tersteegen within the Reformed Church.

The understanding of Tersteegen as a Saint is based upon his life, which was imbued with a conscious striving for holiness. In beginning to represent this life of endeavour, however, we at once come up against a great difficulty, for the secret of his life is not easily disclosed. Tersteegen's life had no dramatic moments, and he experienced no strange adventures or perilous incidents. Everything on the large scale was quite foreign to him. Although we find no particularly striking episodes in this life, and although it passed by in almost unbroken silence, it is not to be regarded as an idyll. His whole lifetime was pervaded by a wonderful quietness without becoming in the least monotonous. It is the life of a man who always stayed within the garden of God. To this circumstance is due that almost unearthly radiance, which, of course, ordinary sensation-loving men can never know. Despite its apparent immobility Tersteegen's existence was far from being the uneventful life of a soul. In dealing with him we have to do with a man who, quite simply, radiates a holiness whose power can be discerned to this day. To cavil at his originality, as certain theologians have done, can only reveal that one has not seen the inner beauty nor appreciated the meaning of the quietude of this life. Tersteegen had nothing of the heroic in him, but he embodied a union with God, whereby everything fell into its proper place. In his candour, he reminds one of man before the Fall, whose life unfolded willingly like delicate flowers in the noiselessness of the sun.

Unfortunately, posterity possesses not a single portrait of Tersteegen, for he never permitted paint-brush or pencil to render immortal the features of his mortal countenance. All extant portraits of him are thus entirely imaginary, and we have to depend, therefore, on a simple description of his personality. In constitution he was frail, his figure was lean and of medium stature, and his pallid though refined countenance often gave him the appearance of a dead man. Yet, in all his frailty, he made the impression of a Saint on all around him. When people came to this simply but never untidily dressed man, in their sore distress, they felt encouraged merely on beholding him; and they would be filled with a great reverence even if they just happened to pass by his house. The humility with which Tersteegen was wont to say that he was his Father's child, not His counsellor, may be seen also in his rejection of any interest in his biography. He even wished, "with all my heart, that the name of Gerhard Tersteegen may be

forgotten by all men."<sup>4</sup> He refused to set about writing his *autobiography*, saying, "God! How tedious, confused, and, indeed, obnoxious, that would be!"<sup>5</sup> Rather did he believe such a task more suited for Eternity: "Then shall you see my life, there will you live with me, and there shall we rehearse our lives to each other, to the eternal praise of God."<sup>6</sup> This complete refusal to contemplate his own personality can only be achieved by the Saint, who has left far behind him all those vanities which again and again disfigure the acts of man.

Tersteegen's intellectual interest, moreover, is also firmly rooted in the world of the Saints. His greatest prose work, which he began to write in the prime of life, and at which he toiled unremittingly for more than twenty years, is the *Selected Lives of Holy Souls*, which he published in several editions. One's attitude to this book is the decisive criterion whereby one may determine whether one has understood or not the inmost essence of Tersteegen. The fact that this work is usually not even mentioned in the popular versions of his life shows more clearly than anything else how the purely devotional interpretation of his personality has been completely missed. And even those authors who have not wanted to pass this great work by in silence, have shaken their heads over it in complete incomprehension. One finds fault with it in that in these books Tersteegen "has represented the purely Catholic and un-German people of the time of the Counter-Reformation."<sup>7</sup> Even the highly favourably disposed biographer of Tersteegen, Goebel, calls the work "frankly a most unsound and dubious piece of writing"<sup>8</sup>; and Wilhelm Nelle also deplores it.<sup>9</sup> These judgments, however, merely reveal how little, up till then, people had been able to understand the hidden countenance of Tersteegen. We cannot approve of Tersteegen and, at the same time, reject his *Lives*. Behind the three venerable folios of the *Lives of Holy Souls* lies his whole personality, and they embody in the purest form the soul of Tersteegen himself. About the life of the Saint there revolved his inmost meditations; for he was one of those men to whom the striving for holiness was their highest duty.

Only a man who was utterly free from any tendency towards Catholicism, could have found the unbiased singleness of mind necessary for meeting the Saint in utter freedom. It was not in Tersteegen's mind, in writing his work, "to give anyone any cause to become converted to the Roman Catholic religion, since I myself am a Protestant and remain so. I extol the holiness of these souls, not the name of their religion."<sup>10</sup> But he was also quite free from the shameful pettiness of hitting out at the different creed of the Saints; rather did he give expression to the old Protestant conviction "that God has still hidden His seed in the Roman Church," basing himself, for this view, on Flacius' *Catalogue of the Witnesses of Truth*.<sup>11</sup> In the composition of this work, Tersteegen rose above matters of creed, with the result that it has nothing at all to do with either Catholicism or Protestantism. Tersteegen's Christian attitude is clearly expressed in the eloquent *Dedication* to the "Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Saints": "With bowed spirit and with childlike trust do I dedicate to

Thee what is utterly Thine, these patterns and testimonies of Thy Saints, which, in all that they are, are only through Thee, at the price of Thy exuberant charity. Thou hast united Thyself with them, Thou has lived in them and through them; therefore, yea, therefore only have they lived in holiness. If I do praise them, I do but praise Thy gifts. All deeds, all virtues, all light, all grace and all the wonders which we behold in them are but Thy Grace. This have they themselves most humbly perceived on Earth; and they do avow it at this hour even in Heaven where they do lay down the crowns of their holiness and their glory at Thy feet. Ah, grant then to me also that I most submissively may present and dedicate to Thee the few pearls which we do still have here below, which are from their crowns. These jewels have I found, and I have loved them: and I do know this as Thine especial Grace, and I do render thanks unto Thee for it. Yea, I too have ventured to gather together these very things wherewith I may present to Thee and to Thy Community the testimony of my gratitude. Fervently do I pray that Thou approve of this my undertaking; wherewith I shall not need for other approbation."<sup>12</sup> From these truly lapidary words we may observe how Tersteegen in no way disavowed his evangelical position. We may indeed compare the religiousness of this wonderful book with J. S. Bach's Mass in B Minor, in which the great composer of Church music, without being disloyal to his Protestantism, sank the roots deeper than the Reformed kingdom of the earth, right down into the Middle Ages. Moreover in Tersteegen's *Lives of Holy Souls* there lives the feeling of inward relationship between Protestantism and the Catholic Church, which is never completely lost. His work is a rare document of that evangelical knowledge in which the best elements of Catholicism are still a living entity.

Without any exaggeration one may speak of Tersteegen's *Lives of Holy Souls* as a real jewel of Christian literature which, moreover, is scarcely equalled by Gottfried Arnold's *Life of the Early Christians* or Reitz' *History of the Reborn*. In his invaluable book there are examined for the first time a number of great figures such as Catherine of Genoa, Angela of Foligni, the Marquis de Renty, Magdalena of Pazzi, Gregorio López, Theresa of Jesus, and very many Reformed Christians. To Protestant Christendom Tersteegen opened new doors with these exemplary portraits of holiness, conquering for it a new land, of which it has scarcely made any use at all. The *Lives of Holy Souls* are written on the basis of rare documents and offer a wealth of the most profound religious perceptions. They make the reader acquainted with that grandiose theology of the Saints beside which the theology of the schoolmen tastes like stale water. With their tendency towards events they form a vivid contrast to formal history, which, with its bare antiquarian account, has but slight value as portraiture. "Had I regarded further, that the lives of such souls not only shed a great light on the history of the Church, but *are* the history of the Church," then, according to Tersteegen, one could have got rid of "the whole loads of useless authors, public affairs, and vain wranglings which fill profane history."<sup>13</sup> Tersteegen's *Lives of Holy Souls*

are above all a carefully attentive description of events which seeks to understand the spiritual life of each Saint. With regard to the subject-matter, he was not entirely uncritical — as the word “selected” in the full title indicates—and he did not, moreover, deliberately overlook the Saints’ failings, although he observed that “a discreet scrutiny is needful, and a rash condemnation exceedingly harmful.”<sup>14</sup> He consciously renounced all polemics, for to the judicious man they are superfluous, and to the injudicious unavailing, and “we are not in the world to quibble or quarrel, but to live holily.”<sup>15</sup> In this declaration Tersteegen shows once more that to him the *Lives of Holy Souls* was no mere literary work. He wrote it with the very greatest sympathy, and, at the same time, as an aid to his own way through life. The *Lives* represent his own essential religious belief and have always been recognised as such. When Johannes Gossner appended to his unfortunately too drastically abbreviated version of the *Lives of Holy Souls* the old anonymous biography of Tersteegen, and then asked a reader which Saint he had liked best, the reader replied at once, “Saint Tersteegen!”<sup>16</sup>

With the revelation of Tersteegen’s countenance as that of a Saint there arose simultaneously the inadequacy of the conception which portrayed him merely as a pious man. The literature which appeared about Tersteegen added to this misunderstanding by including him among the founders of pietism. Although he occasionally does draw near to the language of the pietists he is clearly distinct from this movement, as Ritschl established: “One cannot conceal from oneself the fact that if Tersteegen had set his course through the pietists about him, it would certainly have led to the complete breakdown of pietism.”<sup>17</sup> It implies no belittlement of the concept “pious man,” if we state emphatically that it is not identical with the term “Saint.” A Saint is more than just a pious man who reads the Bible and refrains from swearing. The Saint oversteps the normal course of life and achieves extraordinary results. In Tersteegen there shines a light which we very rarely encounter; and its deep significance can only be correctly understood when Tersteegen is regarded as a Saint. By such an unusual perception of him it is to be hoped that the strangely neglected study of Tersteegen will receive a new impulse, and finally make possible a practical edition of his writings. The most recent, and utterly inadequate, edition of his collected works is over a hundred years old; and for many years past it has been almost unobtainable.

## II

According to Tersteegen’s own words it is impossible “to make any general system or even an itinerary of all God’s particular directions.”<sup>18</sup> And, in fact, the lives of Saints cannot be told in the same way as ordinary biographies, for they follow different laws. Purely literary standards are completely useless in dealing with these holy men. Only in order to provide a better comprehensive survey is it best to divide the life of Tersteegen into two periods.

The first part begins with Tersteegen's birthplace, Mörs, which lies in the region where the Rhineland has already begun to assume the Dutch appearance of low-lying countryside intersected by canals. Tersteegen was a German—which shows that holiness is not tied to the Latin and the Catholic temperament but can flourish also in the German Protestant heart. The boy attended the Latin school, where he also mastered Greek and Hebrew and thus laid the foundations of his subsequent considerable scholarship. He was obliged, however, to forego studying at the high school on account of the early death of his father, and was sent as an apprentice to his brother-in-law, who was a merchant at Mülheim on the Ruhr. The latter had no understanding for youngsters, and kept him busy rolling barrels into the yard.

It was the reading of the prayer of thanksgiving of a dying clergyman which made the first deep impression on Tersteegen. This religious emotion was strengthened in him when, in the course of an errand, he was going through a wood when he was suddenly seized by a violent attack of the colic, and he thought that he was going to die. He vowed to give himself utterly to God if He would only grant him time to prepare himself for Eternity—and in the instant he was free of his pain. In order to redeem his word, he joined the pietists, who, at that time, were established at Mülheim under the leadership of Probationer Wilhelm Hoffmann, whom we may name as the spiritual father of the young Tersteegen. He took an enthusiastic part in Hoffmann's meetings and was grateful to him for having awakened him. It is wrong, however, to speak of an early conversion in which the religious character was wanting, and then of a second change which occurred some years later, and which can be described as Protestant.<sup>19</sup> Tersteegen himself felt his religious development as a constantly deeper submersion into the Divine. "One is too naive, if one thinks that, by conversion, one is completely ready in a few hours or days."<sup>20</sup>

At the conclusion of his apprenticeship, Tersteegen opened a shop of his own, although he did not feel happy in his profession. The duties of a merchant called, of course, for continual intercourse with the customers and constant business with them was not pleasing to a nature averse to all noise and turmoil. His daily work was a troublesome burden to him. This unsatisfactory state of affairs lasted until his twenty-second year, when he suddenly gave up his shop. The sale of his business clearly reveals a most unpietistic attitude, for it is one of the characteristics of pietism to unite the everyday task of earning a living with piety. Tersteegen applied himself to handwork and learned the craft of weaving silk ribbons. In the normal way people know nothing else about Tersteegen, save that he was a ribbon-weaver, and composed pious poems. This view is not incorrect but is as little representative of his true nature as the trade of spectacle making is of Spinoza. Tersteegen should not be regarded as an uneducated weaver, particularly since he only practised the craft for a few years. It was merely a temporary solution to his life.

A significant feature in the exercise of his business was his withdrawal into solitude, which was a part of his new profession as a weaver. Th

search for seclusion is the proper light in which to observe him, for it is the first sign that he was entering the way of the Saint. He turned away from the world, and sought to heed only what God told him. "Solitude is the school of godliness; for this reason you must wholly shun needless intercourse with men."<sup>21</sup> Tersteegen broke off all connections with his contemporaries, and lived for many years in complete seclusion. A little girl, who helped him with the winding of the silk and brought him his food, was his only companion. For a long time this child was the only link through which he maintained contact with the world. In his retirement from society Tersteegen reduced his requirements to the bare necessities. His clothing was mean, after the manner of a weaver, and his meals were even more frugal than those of the normal outworker. A little meal, water, and milk were sufficient for this Protestant ascetic. Coffee and tea he spurned as inadmissible pleasures. Although Tersteegen knew "that all things can be a help to us, and all things can assist us on our way,"<sup>22</sup> yet, as far as possible, he sought to live without things. "If everything outside us, not only the good things of our life but all the outward things, cannot conform to the nature of our soul, then can our soul find no peace and no life in them."<sup>23</sup> Not the possession of things, but rather the self-denying of them brings peace, according to Tersteegen; and he deemed it a self-deception on the part of man when he fought against this perception in order to scrape together as much as possible in his greedy mania for possessions. The thoughts which preoccupied Tersteegen at that time are to be seen from one of his later pronouncements on this subject: "Oh how often must one grieve to see that so many of us in our exodus from spiritual Egypt take with us such a quantity of large bundles and of packages! Do but see! This can lead but to a most onerous journey: we must go out like pilgrims, free, simple, and truly empty-handed. All this collecting of things together and keeping them only makes our going hard. Whoever does earnestly seek peace for his soul must strive to make his pack as small as possible, so that he will fare even as a pilgrim."<sup>24</sup> So that Tersteegen's own pack should be really small he gave as much of his wages as he could spare to poor people. Tersteegen always thanked God that by means of his seclusion he had been able to preserve himself from all manner of unpleasant acquaintances. In adopting this attitude the ribbon-weaver does at least provide a contrast to the majority of men who are continually on the look-out for interesting personalities, and in doing so are only seeking to cover up their own inner emptiness. "Whosoever says solitude with God, says also: fundamental withdrawal from oneself and from one's fellow men."<sup>25</sup>

When Tersteegen withdrew into seclusion it was, above all, a matter of stillness. This is the word which gives the characteristic stamp to this first period of his life. An overwhelming longing for stillness dwelt in him, and there are few men for whom the simple word "stillness" has that echo of eternity which it possessed for the still, quiet Tersteegen. What it is that gives his life its holy light, which makes the soul radiant and brings precious peace to the heart, is the meaning of stillness which it was his charge to

give to Christendom again. Tersteegen loved both outward and inward silence. To him, piety was essentially that stillness which modern man is scarcely capable of sustaining. The Saint of Mülheim was one of the quietest men who ever trod this earth. He regarded it as necessary for the Christian "often to enter into a holy stillness in himself," for only in this way could the voice of God become audible. To stillness Tersteegen attributed a particular meaning since only within stillness could true prayer be practised. Only when a man moves into the stillness of the heart will he be inwardly visited by God. "We must speak with God in prayer, whether verbally or with our hearts; but we must not only pray, for we must also be silent before God, so that He may speak a little word unto our hearts."<sup>26</sup> Like the Spanish mystics Tersteegen, too, practised inward prayer, during which he understood that the soul drew nearer to God and remained in His sight: "Praying is beholding the all-present God, and letting oneself be seen by Him."<sup>27</sup> Tersteegen called this speaking a sweet silence, and his whole life became a prayer, so that he could sit down and, if he had to, speak with anyone, although inwardly he was ever at prayer. He perceived in silence what God engenders in the heart; and Tersteegen's own life was nothing less than an instant in the stillness of eternity.

In this stillness Tersteegen came to know a happiness which is completely unknown to the ordinary man who gives himself up to outward variety and continually new relationships. The inner realities possessed a great power over him and allowed his soul to ring with jubilation. From this feeling of purest joy springs his declaration: "I cannot describe how delighted I was when I dwelt alone; and I often thought that no king in the world could live so contentedly as I did then."<sup>28</sup> Overjoyed did Tersteegen give thanks to God that, metaphorically, He had given him a chamber into which no creature could ever enter. He had experienced in himself how God can be all-sufficient to a soul so that intercourse with men has no more meaning for it. To this experience may we ascribe Tersteegen's great self-sufficiency, which prevented him from becoming like most people who have been spiritually awakened. His intellectual independence, which was the direct result of his union with God, reveals him as the Saint of Protestantism. Since Tersteegen grew less and less susceptible to external influences, his life became like a still, lonely lake in whose clear smoothness Heaven was reflected.

Tersteegen, of course, suffered sore temptations in his solitude. Like the early Christian anchorites he felt himself assailed by strange spirits, and often had to fight with himself. He went through hours of gloom in which it seemed God's light grew dim. The renunciation of conjugal life did not come easily to him, for "he thought much about flesh and blood in this respect."<sup>29</sup> Indeed Tersteegen believed that there could be "true Saints even in a state of matrimony,"<sup>30</sup> but like most of the Saints he held that a life of celibacy was a more certain way of attaining a higher level of perfection. In addition to this, he had to overcome other temptations. "Through much reflection and meditation on the many various sects of Christianity, he fell into the temptation of wondering if there was a God at

all," says the old biography.<sup>31</sup> Tersteegen was to experience in his own body that the most implacable enemy of man dwells within him. His solitary mode of life was especially detrimental to him when he fell ill, for his bed of sickness was unheeded by his fellow-men. Only very much later did he write how he was once ill in bed or lying on the floor for more than ten weeks, without the friends in whose house he was, and to whom he paid board and lodging, even bothering to send down one of their idle girls to "reach me a drink of water. But I always thought that that was what was meant to be."<sup>32</sup> How insignificant is the brief comment, "but I always thought that that was what was meant to be," and what infinite resignation does it reveal! Tersteegen did not cry out against fate but always tried to be at one with God's will, for he believed: "Had we but the nature of the Saints, we would rejoice in our misfortunes."<sup>33</sup> This attitude was quite incomprehensible to other men, and his own relatives called him a fool, and would have nothing more to do with him.

For five years Tersteegen remained in stillness, and then there occurred something which must be regarded as a milestone in his religious development. It was on the Thursday of Holy Week in the year 1724 that Tersteegen picked up his pen, and instead of using an inkwell dipped it into his own blood, and then, with solemn earnestness, wrote these words on a sheet of paper: "I dedicate myself to Thee, my own Saviour and Bridegroom, Christ Jesus, to be utterly and for ever Thine. I do renounce with all my heart all right and might, which Satan may have given me, from this evening on, in which Thou, my Bridegroom in blood, my Christ, through Thy mortal battle, Thy struggle and the sweating of Thy blood, hast, in the Garden of Gethsemane, bought me to be Thine own and Thy bride, set wide the gates of Hell, and revealed to me the loving heart of Thy Father. From this evening on be Thine my heart, and all my love devoted and offered up in thanks to Thee for evermore! From now on into eternity not my but Thy will be done! Command, rule, and reign in me!"<sup>34</sup> This awkward dedication suggests a parallel to the time when Pascal wrote his famous memorial. Both documents deal with an extraordinary event which cannot be wholly expressed in sentences. In each case it was their most personal experience over which they preserved an unbreakable silence. In this using of blood for ink we must not see just the extravagance of the baroque age. With a man like Tersteegen who had very early in life freed himself of religious fits such a judgment is quite inappropriate. All the same, it would be unsuitable to attempt to analyse this highly intimate dedication. We must stand before it in reverence as a mystery which has a right to remain aloof from the curious. The dedication proclaims a truly Christian revelation which, with Tersteegen, remained unchanged until his death. From this time forth Christ was the ruling factor in his life. Everything in this Saint now came from his inward recognition of Christ. His Christ-Mysticism was indeed indissolubly interwoven with his God-Mysticism.

The significance of this dedication of Tersteegen's life is that at the same time it gave him the gift of speech, and he afterwards wrote his first poem:

"How inwardly good art Thou to me." The power suddenly came over him without his seeking it. As though by inspiration did the song spring to his lips, and in the act the poet was born in him. It was the same thing with the other poems he wrote: "These rhymes and prayers have for the most part been given to me unexpectedly and by chance, owing to there being little time; and without any art or elegance, just as they came into my thoughts, have I set them down on paper."<sup>35</sup> This declaration enables one to peep into Tersteegen's creativeness as a poet. Without even thinking of poetry, the poems came into existence from one hour to the next; nor did he even have to spend all day in polishing his work. And, to be frank, this is very clear from the poems themselves. Many of Tersteegen's verses are purely pious rhymes, and quite worthless from the artistic point of view. He cannot therefore be numbered among the great poets, nor did he ever himself lay claim to such a title. Too many insipid images flowed from his pen, and in allowing this, Tersteegen was paying his tribute to the end of the baroque age, in which religious poetry sank lower and lower in contrast to Church music which at this time produced its most splendid creations. Even the title of his collection of poems, *The little spiritual Flower-Garden of the Soul, together with the pious Lottery*, makes a somewhat painful impression on the modern reader.

Very occasionally, however, in the midst of the welter of verse, one is suddenly confronted by a few wonderful poems. There are very few of these, but they may be classed among the pearls of pre-Goethe lyrical poetry. According to the judgment of literary history Tersteegen's religious, spiritual songs do form part of true literature. But amid all the confusion of his work there is a poetic remainder which should be regarded principally from the hymnological point of view. Wilhelm NELLE's opinion of Tersteegen's spiritual songs is the correct one: "Tersteegen is, in the deepest sense, a liturgist."<sup>36</sup> In his best lyrics Tersteegen freed himself of his models—among whom, in addition to Angelus Silesius, we may mention Gottfried Arnold—found his own true self, and broke into his own particular song:

*All-sufficing Being,  
Which I choose for me,  
Ever do I treasure;  
Thou alone sufficest,  
Inward, pure, complete,  
All within my spirit.  
Satisfied and still,  
Who on Thee depends  
Shall desire no more.*<sup>37</sup>

It is strange that in Tersteegen's work, side by side with worthless doggerel, we should find nuggets of pure gold. The riddle is explained, however, if we notice what the songs of value are about. Whenever Tersteegen comes to speak, in any form whatsoever, about stillness, then he leaves his pious versifying far behind him. In that instant his lyricism

becomes adoration; it is like a holy singing. As soon as his theme touches upon stillness, then does Tersteegen's song become like a lark ascending, as though it has conquered the heaviness of the mind and triumphs on high over the abyss that lies beneath. As a single example of this, we quote his *Prayer during a Night-time Vigil*:

*Now do men sleep,  
And he who cannot sleep  
Let him adore with me  
The mighty name  
To which both day and night  
Will by the watch of Heaven  
Glory and praise be sung.  
O Jesu, Amen.*

*Now phantasy away!  
My Lord and God is here.  
Thou sleep'st, my Guardian, never,  
And I shall watch o'er Thee.  
Thee do I love,  
Myself to Thee I gave  
That so eternally  
Thy will be done with me.*

*Let it illumine Thee  
The lustre of the Heavens;  
Be I Thy little star  
To twinkle here and there.  
Now I commune:  
Speak Thou, Lord, alone  
Within the deepest stillness,  
To me throughout the darkness.<sup>38</sup>*

### III

The second part of Tersteegen's life embraces his public activity, which now took the place of his seclusion. This sequence in his existence, first stillness and then activity, must be noticed, for it represents a purely religious order of things. Tersteegen regarded his period of preparation in stillness as an indispensable necessity, and from his pen comes this noteworthy injunction: "Our Lord Jesus was silent and hid himself away for thirty years, so that he might instil into us a love for a life of true seclusion; and in his public life he spent barely four years. Indeed, I do often think that could we who have been awakened but sustain a probationary year of stillness and praying, then would our subsequent activity be a little truer and be more innocent both inwardly and outwardly to the Kingdom of God."<sup>39</sup> For his entrance into public life Tersteegen did not pay the price of his stillness; this remained his invisible companion

throughout his life. Moreover he did not rush headlong into a whirl of activity. The transition from the one phase into the other took place gradually, in accordance with his natural disposition. The overcoming of his flight from the turmoil of the world manifested itself in the first place by his opening a little door through which other men could pass. He determined to give instruction to his brother's children, and at his urgent request he took into his house a friend who held the same beliefs as himself, Heinrich Sommer, and together with him began to lead a normal domestic life. Tersteegen had in no way sought his public life, it was as though it had been allotted to him by God, for men began coming to him with requests more and more, and he did not think that he should withhold his services from them. Thus his many-sided activities did not conform at all to his own desires, but were thrust upon him against his natural inclinations. "As far as I am concerned, I would lead a completely different kind of life if I had the choice; I have to read, and write, and have intercourse with men, when I would much rather, according to my own wishes, remain almost completely silent, hide myself away, and think only of God."<sup>40</sup> He had received the charge, however, and his conscience would not permit him to refuse the task of being a sower of the Gospel. It is peculiarly exciting to follow Tersteegen as he came out of his still seclusion and began to move again among men. It all happened so gently and so noiselessly that up till now very rarely has any notice been taken of his activity, which was steeped in the mysterious atmosphere of the Saints.

Tersteegen's public life began inconspicuously, without anything of particular importance being attached to it. In the course of time, however, there began to assemble an ever-increasing circle of men who revolved about Tersteegen as he sat simply in his little room. They all longed to hear his words of wisdom. Without any propaganda, the number of his listeners grew larger and larger until finally all the doors of the house had to be opened, and men stood in the adjoining rooms, jammed side by side, so as to be able to catch even a few of his utterances. Even ladders were produced and set up against the windows, and his audience sat on the rungs of them. At this picture of such a great spiritual hunger one cannot help recalling the descriptions in the book of the Acts of the Apostles; and the image of this scene, reminiscent almost of the first Christians, has something of the beauty of a painting in it. Deathly silence reigned, for Tersteegen, with his weak voice, could only speak quietly. Although, as one would naturally expect, he despised all manner of sensationalism, men would listen to him with breathless excitement. Precisely because Tersteegen shunned all pathetic routine and all "immature propagandism" as a disease in the body of Christendom, his words exercised a remarkable power of attraction. "Conversion is the work of God's Spirit, and not the achievement of man's persuasion,"<sup>41</sup> Tersteegen declared; for he avoided all ponderous phrases, and never said anything which was at all complicated, if he could express it simply. In this freedom from all artistry lies both simple greatness and noble strength. Tersteegen desired nothing more than to bring the eternal truth of the Gospel nearer to his fellow-

Christians once more. On account of this endeavour he was soon regarded as a revivalist preacher. And actually he did achieve a series of results in the Wuppertal the traces of which may be found to this day. But to consider him as a preacher is wrong. It is just the secret of Tersteegen that he did not do what is generally understood by preaching. He spoke to men, addressed them forcibly, placing them existentially before "the greatness of eternity," and he would say: "Behold, you are what you would be, if you had a mind to it."<sup>43</sup> Principally did the word of Tersteegen spread around his native city, but occasionally it was carried into other towns, and he once mounted the pulpit at Krefeld as a lay preacher, on the invitation of the two Mennonite preachers.

A few men wrote down a number of Tersteegen's sayings and after his death they published them, at his instruction, under the title of *Spiritual Crumbs fallen from the Master's Table, gleaned by Good Friends and communicated to Hungry Hearts*. In his later days Tersteegen himself made use of high-flown terminology and expanded his addresses to what modern feeling considers to be an inordinate length. His words, however, have an entirely personal ring, which we find with very few speakers. Tersteegen had not the least interest in purely "speaking sundry words of comfort," for he sought to set before his hearers the goal of holiness. "We come now to what makes us men happy: and when I do speak of happiness, I do mean holy-making; for the holier we become, the happier do we become; and as soon as Christ does make us holy, then does He make us happy also."<sup>43</sup> For Tersteegen, "holiness and happiness were the same thing."<sup>44</sup> But not of a "stubborn holiness" did he speak, for he rejected everything of a forceful nature, since "Christianity is not a thing which amounts to so and so, it is not an attitude or a sham: it is a growing entity, an actual living, wherein all the works of happiness and bliss in God do come freely and without force."<sup>45</sup> Again and again did Tersteegen find inimitable words to make one listen, and even apparently trivial phrases leave an indelible impression. Valuable indeed is his counsel not to cry out against the tricks of fate and not to grumble, but out of "everything which we encounter on our way, to make a little prayer, and to speak with God. . . . You have no need to look on others. Do but look upon yourself. Behold your own shortcomings and close your eyes to those of others. And if, moreover, you cannot approve of what you oft-times see in other pious men, do but feel pity and sorrow, and, offering up a simple little prayer, turn to your dear Saviour, saying: Lord Jesus, see, my little brother is sick, my little brother is wounded, my little brother has become lame."<sup>46</sup> This may seem to be a simple counsel, but it is the inestimable and incomparable simplicity of the Gospel, which, in the face of life's turmoil, urges Christians to "make a little prayer," the real depth of which is borne in on one if one repeatedly acts on the advice in one's own life. In the Protestant Church only a few were able to offer such deep spiritual counsel as Tersteegen: Matthias Claudius, Christoph Blumhardt, and one or two others. Through all Tersteegen's counsels there shines the radiance of his joy in God: "Man and the heart of man were made by God for joy,

nothing but joy."<sup>47</sup> Not for nothing had Tersteegen remained for so long in stillness: the years of inward composure bore ripe fruits.

With uncomprehending frustration the local pastors regarded the meetings at Tersteegen's house as being in competition with their own activities, although he purposely never held his meetings at a time when Divine Service was being celebrated in the churches. The guardians of the Church were by no means favourably disposed towards this outsider, who, in the end, represented universal priesthood in an exemplary manner—always an important problem to Protestantism. They inveighed against him from the pulpit, and denounced his writings. Even in the life of this Saint there was not lacking the initial opposition of the Church. It is evidently proper to the life of every Saint that he has not only to fight against the outer front, but against the inner front as well. Finally, the pastors succeeded in winning over the authorities, and in 1740 a ban was placed on Tersteegen's meetings. He at once submitted to the order, and did not permit himself to suffer the least qualm of bitterness. For ten whole years Tersteegen was prohibited from preaching the Gospel in Protestant Germany! Then the meetings began again, and when they came to deliberate upon the renewal of the ban the authorities hesitated to pronounce it. Tersteegen courageously stood up for the right of free assembly. This fearless attitude towards religious freedom which has at all times been menaced in the history of Christianity deserves to be recognised. This time, moreover, Tersteegen was successful in having his meetings left unmolested. Furthermore, the attitude of the Church gradually began to undergo a change. More and more pastors came under the influence of the spiritually powerful personality of Tersteegen, and they began to realise that God had sent this man to Christianity.

In his personal attitude, Tersteegen kept himself above the question of Church and sects. Under the influence of Probationer Hoffmann he had withdrawn from the Reformed Church in his youth, but never cut himself off from it, for he always remained a Protestant Christian. This withdrawal of his took the form, chiefly, of his remaining away from holy communion, which he regarded as just as irrelevant to one's salvation as baptism.<sup>48</sup> Tersteegen sighed quite openly over the regrettable state of the Protestant Church at that time. But he was far from being a violent attacker of the Church, for, despite its depravity, he never called it a Babel, as did Gottfried Arnold, whom he much esteemed, in his famous song. Still less did it occur to him to found a movement opposing the Church; he had none of the hatred of the partisan. How could it be otherwise with a Saint? He never pushed himself into the foreground, but admonished men always to seek for God, and "to let Tersteegen lie where he is." "Truly spiritual souls," he wrote in one of his letters, "have no special sect of their own."<sup>49</sup> All manner of separatism was alien to him, for he inclined to new hearts not to new dogmas. "A true mystic does not easily become a separatist, he has more important things to do."<sup>50</sup> Tersteegen depended entirely on something more important, and it made him regard all conversions as "dangerous folly" in which man merely neutralises, all too hastily, his

spiritual tension. In a letter Tersteegen gave a minute description of his attitude to religious disputes. "I believe, and indeed am quite sure of it, that both in the party of the Roman Catholics, and among the Lutherans, the Reformers, the Mennonites, and so forth, souls, no less than among the separatists, can attain to the highest peak of holiness and union with God. . . . As regards myself and my attitude, I am not a sectarian dependent upon any religious party, nor have I ever separated myself from any party, nor am I of the mind to do so. . . . Similarly with all people: whosoever fears God and does what is right, it is pleasing to Him, and it is pleasing also to me whatever religious habit he may wear; and thus do I have kindred in all manner of religions, and I do speak to them openly and especially of the Grace of God in Christ, of renunciation, of prayer, of the love of God—and for the rest I do leave to them, inviolate, the whole structure of their understanding and interpretation of the Church, as long as it doth exalt God."<sup>51</sup> Tersteegen had risen above creeds and the point of view in which man is interested in where souls go to but not where they come from. Despite his attitude of being above parties Tersteegen was by no means indifferent to all the various religious sects, and did not esteem all the communities equally. To the great disappointment of many pious souls he gave a firm "No" to Count Zinzendorf's Brotherhood and remained unmoved by all their attempts to win his favour by wheedling flattery. His level-headed mind was out of harmony with Zinzendorf's exalted manner. He considered it to be in order that "in matters of purely secondary consideration everyone should follow the course which he deemed most appropriate and which would advance him most expeditiously towards his goal; for I can love all men, provided they go to work without bigotry or sectarianism."<sup>52</sup> Tersteegen did not have to trouble himself with advocating a single religious attitude for this would only have had the result of overlooking the essential multiplicity of God. According to the old biography Tersteegen allowed "everybody complete freedom to do as best they thought that God would wish."<sup>53</sup> He never gave out that his own utterances were the words of God,<sup>54</sup> and he expressly desired not to be spoken of as an authority to whom nervous souls would attach themselves.

Tersteegen's occupation became the activities of his spiritual leadership. And in his caring for men's souls his holiness becomes vividly apparent. His spiritual guidance revealed the Grace which had been given to this man, and it is no exaggeration to say that the former ribbon-weaver is to be counted among the greatest curers of souls of all time. Through him we may see clearly how spiritual guidance is based on both knowledge and inward experiences which no amount of book-learning can impart. The cure of souls is a charismatic gift with which God signally endows the Saints. It is something quite different from unfeelingly telling people to their faces what their sins are. Tersteegen, too, knew all about sins, but he believed that it was more necessary to remind Christians of the high nobility of their souls. His cure of souls, born of that compassion of God's, which allows its sun to shine over good and evil, took the form of a great

gentleness which could never bring itself to condemn a man, but which brought a genial understanding to his spiritual needs. We shall not have penetrated, however, to the innermost essence of this if we explain it only by Tersteegen's fine psychological feeling which he derived from his study of the mystics. Naturally the cure of souls in his case, as in all genuine cases, included an intuitive knowledge of psychology. But Tersteegen's central endeavour was always to place man in God's radiance, to lead him out of his own spiritual despondency into the Divine light, "through the narrow into the immeasurably wide."<sup>55</sup> This man of stillness was a human who knew all about the ultimate, dark, divined longing of the soul for the supernatural meaning of human existence, but at the same time he was well aware of the only way whereby such a longing might be fulfilled. According to an old account, Tersteegen was to be regarded purely as a leader of souls. He himself rejected this definition for himself—a definition which was familiar to him from quietist mysticism: "I would ask that the word 'leader' be not used in letters."<sup>56</sup> This rejection fits in with his great natural modesty. In point of fact, he was indeed a born leader of souls, the Protestant counterpart of the Catholic Francis de Sales. Obviously, as a Reformed Christian, Tersteegen could not accept the title of soul-leader. He never constrained a soul by force, for it was his principle that "whoever has to do with souls must be even as a nursemaid, who holds the child by reins or leading-strings and saves him from danger and from falling, but who otherwise leaves the child free to proceed on his own."<sup>57</sup> His cure of souls consists in leading men through his understanding of the great meaning of the ordering of life, which only a Saint is capable of practising. Men knew this instinctively, and for this reason they came to him from far away places. They brought to Tersteegen a trust which knew no frontiers, and they acknowledged to him, unasked, all their shortcomings. Often, by reason of the great concourse of people, they would have to wait for hours on end in order to speak just a few words with him. Tersteegen himself once related how for weeks one after the other would have to wait from morning till night, and how often they would have to return five or even six times before it was possible for him to give them a bare quarter of an hour. He frequently had to deal with as many as ten, twenty, or even thirty distressed souls at once. The old biography notes that "a heavy heart did not easily leave him without having been comforted and strengthened."<sup>58</sup> His spiritual activity at this period of his life gives it a brilliance which more than compensates for any shortcomings. What Tersteegen performed in this sphere is of greater value than if he had worked miracles.

Posterity is in a position to form a fair picture of Tersteegen's cure of souls, for his letters are still extant. They represent one of the most valuable contributions to this matter. And yet, incomprehensibly enough, there is no complete edition of them, and many of his letters have not even been printed. Tersteegen may be counted among those great letter-writers of world literature who take time over their writing. He put his whole soul into his letters. The clarity of his epistolary style is at all times

astounding, as is the directness which informs all the letters, whether the recipient belonged to the nobility, or was an old maid of little importance to the world. At the root of them all was Tersteegen's recognition of the infinite worth of men's souls. Tersteegen never held the view that the individual was of lesser consequence than the great events of the world. A single soul can have a greater importance than all the happenings of society. Throughout all his letters there is a rare beneficent atmosphere, which the reader is perhaps not always in the humour to perceive; but to a soul distressed it acts like soothing balsam. They are, without exception, letters for the soul, which call out to the troubled recipients of them: "Be satisfied! For you too, in your condition, can be a Saint."<sup>59</sup> This melody continually recurs in his letters: "We must think more on God than on ourselves."<sup>60</sup> Tersteegen was thoroughly persuaded that the contemplation of himself only makes a man ill, but that in the contemplation of God a man may be healed. In this respect, of course, he was on a better track than those spiritual doctors who always counsel their patients to think only of themselves. Spiritual recovery, to Tersteegen, lay not in regarding the mote in one's own eye, but in occupying oneself seriously with something. He sought to lead a spiritually beset man to the objective, not to surrender him to subjectivism. The man from the Wuppertal had an intimate knowledge of the "depressing nature," which too easily induces one to despondency, melancholy, anxiety, and grievous tribulations. He would counsel a man so afflicted to have a little patience with himself, to humble himself for his shortcomings, but not to become excited about it all: "And do not worry about sin! Through our restless attitude towards sin and temptations we do but make the evil worse. . . . Look upon sin, even upon that which against your will is within you, as though it did not concern you; leave the monster alone, it is not worth your worrying and thinking about it."<sup>61</sup> Only by not becoming agitated at one's sins, but by "forgetting, forgetting, is the true art of recovery. And if it should recur, then forget again, not by force but by thinking of how we may let something fall and so cease to retain it."<sup>62</sup> Similarly did Tersteegen warn the recipients of his letters against intellectual worry: "In your conduct, try always to move forward without undue deliberation, in simplicity and innocence, like a speechless child. Do not think it out before, and do not look back; both bring restlessness, and are not suitable to your present state. The present moment must be your dwelling, for in this only may we find God and His will."<sup>63</sup> According to Tersteegen's letters, one must learn, even in all moods of depression and of gloom, to trust—without feeling or seeing—in the invisible presence of God. He also enjoins us to be passive rather than active, and he even advocates a passive attitude towards doubt: "The atheists both within us and outside us are merely supported and strengthened if we carefully examine and reply to their scruples."<sup>64</sup> Above all did Tersteegen know wonderfully how to comfort men who were in sorrow: "Since it is pleasing now to God that you should be sorrowful, demoralised, and powerless, then let it be pleasing to you too! . . . Rejoice, then, that you be so miserable, and that God is so holy

and so perfect. Sorrow and nothingness are proper to us from the beginning of time; holiness, and being all things, is of God. . . . Resolve, therefore, to sit tranquilly amid your miseries like Job upon his dunghill, and love God."<sup>65</sup> His correspondents were exhorted to seek God even more intensively than they had previously done, and not to relax from their endeavours for a single day. "None of us has come so far, that we do not need to come still farther. There is no resting apart from God."<sup>66</sup> An eloquent grace fills Tersteegen's letters, since he always includes himself in his counsels: "Many a time do I address myself, when it appears that I address others."<sup>67</sup> All his psychological and spiritual precepts reveal a great love for his fellow-men, without in any way implying a remoteness from God. For men who are in trouble there is little to read which is as constructive as the letters of Tersteegen. They were even mentioned by Albrecht Ritschl, who "received the beneficent impression of a cool room with subdued lighting, in which one can rest from the heat and the turmoil of one's work, and from the harsh glare of day."<sup>68</sup> In their religious power they may properly be placed on a level with the pronouncements of his contemporary, Baalschem, the founder of Chassidism, whose words shone with the very sunlight of God.

Included in Tersteegen's spiritual care was the small domestic community which dwelt on the Otterbeck estate between Mühleim and Elberfeld. The Pilgrim's Hut, as it was called, can be regarded as a Protestant monastery; it is a unique phenomenon in the Protestant Church, and shows how Tersteegen, quite simply, was able to turn unusual ideas into reality. The inhabitants were all unmarried—which is characteristic of the Tersteegians, although his followers must not be confused with Tersteegen himself—and lived according to a rule which set the course of a communal life of work and prayer, and whose only purpose was to be brought nearer to true holiness.<sup>69</sup> Tersteegen himself did not dwell with this community, but they were wholly under his guidance. He was their spiritual leader, and he often visited them in this capacity. In his letters, moreover, he frequently exhorted the members of the community to comport themselves like monks. Tersteegen, who did not blindly oppose monasticism, was very fond of this conception of a Protestant monastery, and the realisation that it was doomed to failure grieved him deeply.

To his spiritual work we must add something which is somewhat more widely known: his activity as a writer. He had no ambition to achieve literary fame, for his writing was entirely dedicated to the service of his fellow-men. During his years of seclusion Tersteegen had devoted himself to intensive study, and achieved a wealth of learning which many an erudite scholar might envy. His principal interest lay in the French quietism, which, together with his Protestant education, exercised the greatest influence on the shaping of his personality. Tersteegen was an adherent of quietism which, with him, thanks to his Protestant outlook, underwent a change.<sup>70</sup> It was just the quietist attitude, as it was represented by the sorely traduced Madame de Guyon, to which Tersteegen felt himself attracted, and towards the diffusion of whose writings he did so

much in Germany.<sup>71</sup> He became familiar with her works through Peter Poiret, whose library came into his hands.<sup>72</sup> We also find in Tersteegen's work the great influence of Gottfried Arnold.<sup>73</sup> Under these many and various influences Tersteegen then began his literary activities as a translator, putting the works of Albertus Magnus, Tauler, Thomas à Kempis, Philip Neri, Labadie, Madame de Guyon, and many others into German. These translations must be considered as "recoveries" in Lessing's sense of the word, since Tersteegen took up little-known Christians, and felt that it was his duty to bring the hidden treasures to light. Through his translations Tersteegen acted as an important link between the Latin and the German outlook on life, and in doing so showed himself as a true son of the Rhineland. Especially in his monumental *Lives of Holy Souls* was Tersteegen one of the first to introduce Spanish mysticism into Germany, and he did pioneering work which was later to be continued by Görres, Schwab, Diepenbrock, and Storck. With time, however, the Saint felt constrained to give expression to his own meditations instead of devoting himself to the work of translation. Most significantly have they been gathered together under the title of the *Way of Truth*, a book which has rightly been recently republished. Tersteegen's works cannot be classified under the headings usually applicable to devotional books. With all their spirituality, they reveal too great a harshness, and he was himself only too clear about his "breach with Christians."<sup>74</sup>

Part of his spiritual work consisted in his interest in medicine, which should not be regarded as separate from his other activities. Tersteegen had given up his ribbon-weaving shortly after the end of his period of seclusion, and he devoted himself to the preparation of medicines. How he came to interest himself in this is not clear: whether his own frail state of health, which permitted him to live only as a *candidatus mortis* all his life, brought him to think of medicine, or whether he came into association (which has not been proved with any certainty) with the celebrated chemist, Von Richter, at the Halle Orphanage, is not known.<sup>75</sup> Tersteegen, however, is said to have acquired a "fine perception of medicines," according to the old biography.<sup>76</sup> He set up a small laboratory equipped with retorts, test-tubes, bottles and boxes, and he once burnt himself severely when engaged in the preparation of some medicaments. The making of pills, powders, and essences according to prescription books which are still extant, took up a great deal of his time. He himself made use of simple household remedies and did not attempt to conflict with qualified doctors, and he repeatedly drew his friends' attention to this. To those who sought his help he usually gave his medicines without any charge. With Tersteegen medical work was closely connected with religious principles, in accordance with which, in certain circumstances, physical suffering may arise from an improper Christian attitude.<sup>77</sup> Tersteegen was a modest, but by no means an inexperienced doctor. His ever-increasing practice obliged him to take on an assistant. Great confidence was placed in him, and there were even people who would allow nobody else to treat them, and who travelled

far to consult him. He was no quack, nor would he ever yield to the temptation of being regarded as a worker of miracles, the symptoms of which displeased him and which he always sought to avoid. Tersteegen's medical activity may be cited as the last embodiment of the Priest-Doctor ideal, for he felt that, spiritually, both these activities were one and the same. It is probable that in this Tersteegen went back to Paracelsus, with whose existence he was familiar through the writings of Weigel and Böhme. But even though we must be on our guard not to overestimate Tersteegen's work as a doctor, it does represent an eloquent feature of his nature in that he felt it necessary to help men's bodies and not just their souls. In doing this, he was unconsciously demonstrating that he regarded man in his entirety, which is something we frequently encounter with the Saints.

Tersteegen's preaching, his spiritual work, his writing, and his activity as a doctor spread far and wide through North-western Germany. And the influence of his public work extended to Holland, Sweden, and even America. When the allied soldiery passed through Mülheim in 1814, Russian soldiers visited Tersteegen's house, and prayed at his graveside. According to the somewhat exuberant judgment of Jung-Stilling, no man since the time of the Apostles has brought so many souls to Christ as Tersteegen did. But the most attractive feature of this many-sided and far-reaching activity was that Tersteegen throughout it all was never untrue to himself. Despite all his activity, he never lost himself in the unending whirl of being busy. Throughout all the demands of his fellow-men, he remained faithful to that invisible stillness from which all his being flowed, and which we must praise as the sign of his true holiness.

#### IV

Although Tersteegen followed several different lines in his public activity, he was principally concerned with one thing only. All his callings were really *one* calling, which he did not regard as theological. "I am, as is known, no professional theologian, and have never been to any university."<sup>78</sup> Rather did he regard his task as the execution of a mission with which he had been charged, and which he applied to the needs of his time; he did not represent it as a rigid system. The words of Tersteegen may be likened to a light in a dark room, which can illuminate everything in its own particular way. Although he always sought to say the same thing, he did not always say it in the same way. He developed his mission in the direction of whatever he found himself confronted with. We find that he adapted himself in a remarkable manner to his times, and only ignorance can accuse him of having consciously failed to fit into the trends of his day.

It was a period marked by a great lack of unity. Germany, at that time, was still suffering from the effects of the Thirty Years' War and on the point of abandoning the baroque. This initiated the disintegration of western Christendom—in which process Protestantism played a greater part than Catholicism. Within the inner perimeter of Christianity there

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was no impregnable fortress, for everything was grievously undermined already. Although the narrowness of the age is sometimes emphasised, the historical situation becomes much more vital in that it was also the division into the two great camps of the dying orthodoxy and pietism which was slowly establishing itself. These two groups were at that time violently opposed to each other. And the real victor which arose out of these church struggles was rationalism, which overshadowed all other human endeavours.

It is an indication of Tersteegen's spiritual vigilance that, with his fine instinct, he clearly recognised the power of rationalism. He sensed which way the battle was going. He had a feeling for the composition of his age, and realised the change in the recognition of godliness which was the natural consequence. Obviously Tersteegen could not perceive in this rationalism, as his clear-sighted contemporary, Lessing, could, the dawn of modern Christianity. He neither saw a new morrow rising upon the horizon, nor did he understand the deeper implications of the rationalist movement. Nor was it a part of his mission to show how the new rationalism was interpreting the Divine word in regard to the burning of witches and intolerance. We may call this Tersteegen's limit, and concede it to him in all tranquillity, without any detriment to his significance. Moreover, Tersteegen was more closely allied to nature than is generally accepted; and he was familiar with that "still Hallelujah, which is in all created things." Everything which is known as culture was, fundamentally, foreign to him, and he had little taste for things as things. A cultural view of life was far from his mind, for he saw all worldly things in the light of the Gospel only. For this reason he at once regarded the new rationalism as the work of the devil, which had to be opposed; and the age of reason, with its rationalistic outlook, provoked no understanding in the Saint. This attitude of Tersteegen's was a biased one which should not be glossed over, yet we should also realise that it was needful to offer some opposition, since rationalism, with its tendency to sneer, proved detrimental to Christianity. Tersteegen, like his younger contemporary, J. G. Hamann, recognised this need, and he did not set himself at variance with the times blindly. The fight against reason is an extraordinarily difficult undertaking, which calls for the very greatest presence of mind. A fanatical hostility to it overshoots the mark, and does more harm than it does good. Only too easily do lazy thinking and lack of logic shelter behind the fight against reason, for usually men think too little and not too much. And, finally, only Saints should lead the war against rationalism, for only they have a right to do so, since they occupy a position which is above all reason.

The fight against rationalistic principles is to be discerned in many of Tersteegen's pronouncements. His attitude, above all, was to "commend the rationalists to the mercy of God," and "not to enter too much into their element," for the "mighty wind will come, and overthrow their whole structure."<sup>79</sup> At the same time, in his *Epistle of Reason, and its Capacity, its Use, and its Abuse in the Divine*, Tersteegen entered into a kind of compromise with the rationalists. He did not, indeed, act as a declared

opponent of reason, but always maintained: "Reason is, in itself, a noble faculty, so long as it is subservient to the mind; but it is a most harmful thing, when it rules the mind."<sup>80</sup> He would not consider it as a queen, even though it was regarded in another land as the aim of holiness. When reason attempts to speak of the relationship of God to man, Tersteegen cries out: "Oh! Reason, be still! The sea is all too wide and all too deep; here is no soil for all thy wisdom and thy speculation."<sup>81</sup> To the Saint of Mülheim, a God Who could be comprehended was no God. Moreover, in his letters, there appears repeatedly a warning against "the evil neighbour," whereby he understood "one's own mocking, sly reason."<sup>82</sup> He regarded Reason as a "false advocate" which crams "men's heads with all manner of sham reasons for everything,"<sup>83</sup> and on one occasion he even went so far as to call Reason Antichrist.

It is worth while noticing that Tersteegen, in his fight against the new age of rationalism, was not satisfied with pointing out the overweening presumption of Reason, but, in the positive sense, represented a different attitude as opposed to the rationalistic outlook. "We must not be pre-occupied for too long with our heads, but, as soon as possible, return back into the heart."<sup>84</sup> Tersteegen distinguished between two ways of thinking, which are inherent in man: thinking with the head, and thinking with the heart. If the Christian seeks to make known his way to the heart through the understanding, he must say little, lest he say too much and perhaps not attain what he seeks. "We must walk straight on according to our hearts," was Tersteegen's significant adjuration, which, as with Pascal, shows the thinking from the heart in opposition to rationalistic thinking.<sup>85</sup> "From the head into the heart," he said, "for not in the head but in the heart is there revealed that pure and true understanding whereby we may know God and the things of God; for the heart is the eye of the understanding, which must be opened for us by God."<sup>86</sup> Again and again did the man from the Wuppertal stress the fact "that we can never find God and truth through the activity of the mind, but through the heart and through love,"<sup>87</sup> because only the heart is capable of thinking symbolically, and uses images which the Divine nature never relinquishes, as Tersteegen expressly remarked. With this fundamental perception, the Protestant Saint circumscribed the basis of all religious understanding. When Christendom lost the way of thinking from the heart it lapsed into spiritual illness; and it forfeited the only way of thinking which is proper to religiousness. Only the Saints have been able to withstand this fateful process.

Tersteegen's opposition to rationalism is most apparent in his relations with Frederick the Great. It would appear to be the most impossible of contrasts: the great, world-renowned King, and the modest, retired ribbon-weaver. It is not easy to think of two men more unlike each other: the double-tongued Frederick II, who wrote an *Anti-Machiavelli*, and yet who acted on the Italian's maxims; who sought to lead a conscientious life, and who radiated a deadly cold scepticism; and, on the other hand, the tranquil Tersteegen, the translucent man of eternity, who was one of

the most wonderful mirrors of the Divine illumination. And yet the comparison of the two names is not amiss, for Frederick the Great really was Tersteegen's opponent in the great game. The Saint had read the King's writings most carefully, and in a shrewd treatise, *On the Works of the Philosophers of Sanssouci*, was so inconsiderate as to reveal the shortcomings of this "poor philosophy," which dealt "so sparingly with peace, and at such length with the art of war."<sup>88</sup> When Frederick read Tersteegen's criticism he was surprised, and reacted not unfavourably to the latter's comments, which should perhaps be taken as an indication that in his heart was a hidden religious need which was still ill at ease, and which, with his rationalistic doubts, he vainly sought to pacify. In the course of a visit to the Rhineland, Frederick issued an invitation to the critic to go and see him. The latter, however, did not accede to the King's request. Tersteegen was by no means flattered by the royal summons, and he realised their different ways of thought all too clearly to believe that this meeting would lead to an understanding. Moreover, this lover of truth was not the sort of man to talk nothing but courtesies as a subject to his King; and to declare open war against the King, which would have been the inevitable outcome, was out of the question, in view of the desperate situations of the two participants. It was this consideration which led Tersteegen to refuse the royal request, which was an invitation and not a command. There is no doubt that Frederick II, with his rationalistic scepticism, embodied that very spirit which Tersteegen combated with such vigour, and against which the Saints have always fought. Christendom must learn to appreciate the incompatibility of the two outlooks more clearly than it has done heretofore, and not, for the sake of national prejudice, seek to mix fire with water.

Tersteegen was also fighting a battle on a second front, which was the benumbed state of the Church. Orthodoxy cannot be regarded as having become completely as though dead. In the face of Bach's music, it disintegrated even more than pietism. But there still remained in it a great deal of sham Christianity, and Tersteegen felt compelled to rise up against the so-called Christians who had been reborn, but not in the *spirit* of Christ; for they believed that a knowledge of the Holy Writ was enough. Remarkably shrewd is this observation of Tersteegen's: "Even with the very best teaching men can follow the wrong path, and be lost for ever."<sup>89</sup> In his counsels he clearly turned on those people who "seek to have nothing whatever to do with *doing* anything."<sup>90</sup> He did not declare that everything could be put right by renewed activity, for he fully realised man's inability to help himself. Rather did he attempt to set stagnant Christianity on a positive path, so that it would heed the possibility which it had overlooked. It was in this connection that he said: "At all times a Paul was needed to discard the Jews' justice in order to show forth the justice of Christ: so to-day are needed a Peter and a James, to show, through God's spirit, that what Paul in the wisdom which was given to him did write is not always rightly understood; occasionally, however, it is neither misrepresented nor taken too far, and the truth of it remains

unharmful for all time."<sup>91</sup> This campaign against an all too commodious system of self-justification, which had gradually become a soft pillow, and James' vindication of honour are similarly confused with Kierkegaard's declarations in his work, *On Self-Examination*.<sup>92</sup> It was no coincidence that the Danish Socrates, after becoming acquainted with the pronouncements of the Saint of Mülheim, should have joyfully written in his diary: "On the whole, Tersteegen is incomparable. I find in him a true and a noble godliness, and a simple truthfulness."<sup>93</sup> The spiritual relationship between Tersteegen and Kierkegaard extends, principally, to the remarkably serious interpretation of the essence of Christianity, about which the man from the Wuppertal wrote: "Oh no! To be a Christian is either something great, or it is nothing at all."<sup>94</sup> Vigorously did he attack the superficial attitude to Christianity: "The single utterance: 'I am a Christian, I believe in Christ,' meant, during the first centuries of Christianity, many and great things; even more than we do think to-day. No one could make this simple avowal, who was not resolved willingly to accept the inevitable hatred and insults of the whole world, the renunciation of everything which was pleasing to nature, the lack of every single possession, and the suffering of everything which inhuman wickedness could devise in the most terrible way. Much indeed must they have felt in their hearts, who said: 'I believe in Christ.' We do deceive ourselves, and others, when we so lightly skim over everything, and imagine to ourselves that nowadays, when Christianity walks in slippers, the phrase, 'I believe in Christ,' so easily said, means the same as it did in those first passionate centuries."<sup>95</sup>

In these declarations Tersteegen was being no more untrue to his Protestant outlook than Kierkegaard. Rather did he develop that internal Protestant criticism, which had already begun with the misunderstood spiritualists at the time of the Reformation. According to Tersteegen, the Reformation, "by reason of many sins and much ingratitude, did not attain to the desired perfection," but "pitifully declined again."<sup>96</sup> This internal Protestant criticism, in which the very existence of Protestantism is set up in opposition to mere dogma, must not be summarily dismissed if we are not to be disloyal to the genuine Protestant spirit. In his criticism, Tersteegen revealed himself as one of the most faithful sons of Protestantism, who regarded the reforming principle as a living factor which needed to be applied again and again. Measured by the standards of the Bible, this internal Protestant criticism—Tersteegen interpreted Romans VII differently from Luther—puts forward a justifiable demand, which must be acknowledged. The Reformers should not be regarded as the only norm. With all their immense greatness, they were only the pioneers of Protestantism. But there are yet other possibilities within Protestantism (as we may see from the existence of Tersteegen), the religious structure of which was very different from those of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, although Tersteegen always mentioned these names with the greatest respect. The internal Protestant criticism arose from the self-same powers which had brought about the Reformation.

Although, when necessary, Tersteegen could assert his views with energy, his was by no means a militant nature in the normal course of events. The warlike spirit was not an essential element of his character as it was with Luther; nor could it have been, unless he was to be untrue to his nature as a Saint. Saints fight differently from other men. The very idea of bitter polemics is fundamentally alien to them. Their greatest effect is caused by the simple fact of their existence, which is a constant reminder of other possibilities. Tersteegen was less interested in correcting a misapprehension, than in showing the true position of things. This was invariably his method. Where he found himself in opposition to Reason, he would point out the way of the heart; where he sought to correct a partially understood Paul, he produced the Apostle James. His action was always positive. Thus, in representing his mission we must, above all else, notice carefully whatever he says in the affirmative sense: for only then will the hidden countenance of Tersteegen be revealed.

Since it was Tersteegen's aim to become as one with God, passively and formlessly, he has always been considered as a mystic. Of his mystical attitude, which he certainly did not use to calm down his activities as has been falsely claimed, he gave many proofs. He submitted unreservedly to the guidance of God, and he thought that it was good if a man lost his prayer in order to make room for the spirit of God. He did not understand the Scriptures "as if God would not work through any other medium; for He both could and did work without any medium."<sup>97</sup> He frankly called it a pious fraud that "God had given man only the Holy Writ," and he declared that "if we knew nothing more than the Holy Scriptures, and had no other company on the way to godliness, we should never reach our goal."<sup>98</sup> Finally he gave the reader this astounding injunction: "You yourself should become a Holy Writ."<sup>99</sup> Mysticism, with the various forms of which he was well acquainted, was not to him a question of erudite knowledge, but of life. The mystical states of purification, illumination, and union he had experienced himself in his soul. And it was, furthermore, an established fact with Tersteegen "that on a single little page of the true mystical writings, there is to be found, by those who seek God, more of the Divine essence, light, counsel, comfort and peace, than in ten and more folios of feeble, insipid theology."<sup>100</sup> The question of what one is to understand by mysticism was answered by Tersteegen from the mystical experience itself. "No one can say rightly what it is without himself being a mystic; and no one can properly understand it, if he is not on the way to being a mystic."<sup>101</sup> According to Tersteegen, mysticism does not consist either in knowing extraordinary secrets nor in experiencing blissful ecstasies. "To be utterly for God is the true secret of the inward or mystical life, whereof people make such strange and frightening pictures to themselves," Tersteegen wrote in one of his letters.<sup>102</sup> There is a straightforward Christian mysticism, which has nothing of pantheism in it, which mingles in with Tersteegen's words of wisdom and counsel. Moreover he brought to Protestant Christendom the great gift of mysticism, which cannot be prized too highly, and of which Christendom, torn

between orthodoxy and rationalism, stood in sore need. Tersteegen proclaimed in words what his contemporary Johann Sebastian Bach had expressed in music; and according to Albert Schweitzer, Bach was one of the phenomena of German mysticism. In both these men did the Protestant mystical religiousness find its noblest expression, for it was able to blend into a loftier third current, the twin currents of orthodoxy and pietism.

Tersteegen's mysticism does not move along speculative lines. Nor do we find with him any of the bold assertions to be encountered in Master Eckhart and Angelus Silesius. Rather did his mysticism revolve exclusively about the spiritual man, which to him was of such importance, that external man could not compare with it. In this respect Tersteegen cannot be represented as the ideal of the harmoniously conceived man. Yet it is almost always the other way round in life, that much more frequently do we come upon the outwardly developed man, while the perfectly formed inward man is something quite unusual. German spirituality found its fairest flowering in the Saint of the Wuppertal. "Whole worlds are to be found within us; deep down within us lie the secret of evil and the secret of godliness, the depths of Satan, and the depths of Divinity revealed through the spirit. . . . Everything outward is and must be to us a mirror of what is to be found within."<sup>103</sup> Tersteegen was so deeply immersed in his heart, that nothing of what happened to him outwardly could disturb the spiritual man within him. Everything he transferred to his spirit, and even his utterances were based on the heart. Sin dwells within one, and for this reason release from sin must be effected from within also. Man cannot know true bliss so long as he remains outside his soul. This conception led Tersteegen to declare: "Therefore Christ must and shall be born in fact within our hearts."<sup>104</sup> Man, unhappily, has not only joyfully abandoned the outer Paradise, but he has also, and "most especially, lost the inner Paradise."<sup>105</sup> His exclusive inward direction gives to Tersteegen that rare spirituality which grips us like the music of another world, and of which these beautiful words give evidence: "True inward spirituality is the work of God and not of man. . . . A spiritual soul is doing enough even when it does nothing at all. A still sinking-down, a silent acquiescence, a simple watchfulness, is all work enough for a soul in which God works."<sup>106</sup> We encounter the inward man in Tersteegen as the greatest reality of his life; he conversed, as it were, with his own soul: and this can never cease to make us marvel.

Above all did Tersteegen strive to lead the inward man into that stillness in which he may perceive the presence of God. He possessed, furthermore, the wonderful gift of being able to make known the immeasurable significance of God's presence to man, showing how much more it is than the mere conception of Divinity. Tersteegen's deepest endeavour was devoted to entering the presence of God, without having to say anything or to do anything—simply to be beside Him. He strove for this, and for this only. This was quite sufficient for him, as he declared so splendidly in the song which reveals the fundamental melody into which his life harmonised:

*God is ever present:  
Let us then adore  
And venerate Him here!  
God is in our midst,  
Be all within us still  
And let it bow before Him!  
Who do know Him,  
Who do know Him,  
Close your eyes:  
Come, surrender yet again.<sup>107</sup>*

The presence of God is the starting-point and the goal of all Tersteegen's strivings. Whether he was writing letters, heating chemical retorts, or giving counsel to men, he was always in this wonderful presence of God, which he had first experienced during his period of still seclusion, and which remained the central factor of his life. God's presence in his life was like a hub to its wheel, and to which all the spokes converge; and it lent to his life that peculiar sense of security in which there was no room for any feeling of fear. It was from this indescribable presence of God that there flowed both his power of speech and the Grace with which his cure of souls was imbued. It is this alone which makes the mysterious influence which poured out of this man intelligible. The Divine presence was the inviolable core of his existence, and it cannot be described, for it is as though it vanished away from any description of a mystical nature. Tersteegen never attempted to prove the reality of God's presence. But like all the Saints he considered that no book was "superfluous in the world, which sought to prove the existence of God."<sup>108</sup> Apart from a period of temptation he was always firmly convinced of God's existence. It presented no serious problem to him at all since he was filled with the belief that God, unquestionably, was ever present in his heart. This may at first sound rather simple; but, like everything simple, it is the greatest thing, and one of which a man can only speak with trembling and joyful heart. In this belief in the constant presence of God in the Christian's heart lies the inmost core of Tersteegen's religiousness, from which there radiates a perceptible sense of power. "Belief in the merciful, inwardly sweet presence of God is the most powerful means whereby the soul may quickly be made holy."<sup>109</sup> Since Tersteegen regarded his whole life in the inner light of God's presence, he was enabled to speak of it in an exceptionally expressive manner: "The air in which we live is near to us; the air is in us, and we are in the air; God is infinitely nearer to us, we live, we are suspended in God; we eat, drink, and work in God; and whoever sins—be not alarmed that I do say it—sins in God. This presence of God is unimaginable; we cannot and we must not make any picture of it, we must simply believe. . . . God is far deeper within us than the inmost part of us; there does He call us; there does He wait on us; there does He communicate with us, and make us blissful. Furthermore, this presence must we believe without understanding it; nor must we ever seek to feel it . . ."<sup>110</sup> This noble

pronouncement was a real concern to Tersteegen, not merely a doctrinal declaration. The old biography adds, moreover: "The presence of God always appeared to him to be deeply imprinted in his heart. His whole conduct was thus infused with a loving veneration. He believed, with complete certainty, that God, in His especial way, was present in his heart. He knew that God did look within him."<sup>111</sup> It is clear from these observations that Tersteegen did not regard the experience of the Divine presence as a matter of common knowledge, but as something which had been specifically granted to him, and which filled him with the consciousness of God's mercy. God's presence is inapplicable only to the multitude, who have not received the impress of eternity. "The hiddenness of God's presence is truly believed by very few. But do you know, that if everyone were to believe in truth, then the whole world would be filled with Saints, and the Earth would be a true Paradise?"<sup>112</sup>

The blissful presence of God is granted only to the man who strives after it unceasingly. Moreover it is only in a secondary dependence on the emotions. Its difference from all other feelings must be stressed, for one must be careful not to build it up on a rocky foundation. We may feel it or we may not, but this does not alter its activity. Tersteegen distinguished a threefold presence of God: first, His presence in everything which fills everything; then the presence of His grace, which knocks at the door of men's hearts, reminding one of repentance; and, finally, the presence of God which dwells within, and which is the fruit of both the others. With Tersteegen himself this last presence was clearly perceptible, since his whole life was devoted to looking on God, worshipping God, extolling God, and loving God. It was his unshakable knowledge of the reality of God which spoke with overwhelming force from Tersteegen's mystical utterances on the nature of God's presence. In Tersteegen's stillness we come face to face with the eternal mystery, and in fear and trembling have to tread upon the ground where we must remove our shoes: for it is holy ground. The constant presence of God is the secret of Tersteegen's life, and for this reason is he spoken of as a Saint.

## V

Tersteegen once wrote in one of his letters that the children of God have three birthdays. On their first birthday they come into this world; throughout the second birthday they mount by stages out of the dark state of nature into the grace of light; and for the third birthday, Tersteegen, like the martyrs of old, points to death, which "releases God's children from this anxious world, from the narrow prison of this body of humiliations, from all spiritual perils, when it joyfully moves into the boundlessness of loving, sweet eternity. And indeed, this last birth is often sorely distressing so that the child must moan and weep until it is ended; but it is all for his best."<sup>113</sup> Like all the Saints, Tersteegen had a most positive attitude towards death, which bordered on longing; and he once wrote: "When a pious man dies, we should not say 'he is dead'; we should say, 'he has gone

to Heaven; this was the day for his journeying to Heaven'.<sup>114</sup>

It is an indication of Tersteegen's Christianity that as a spiritual pilgrim-age it had only a slight affinity to earthly life. According to him, the Christian is not created for the earth, nor does he have to burrow round in it like a mole. He is to be regarded as a pilgrim only:

*Come, children, let us go,  
The eventide draws near.  
'Tis perilous to stay  
Within this wilderness;  
Come, then, make strong your hearts  
To Eternity to wander,  
From one strength to another,  
The ending is so good.*<sup>115</sup>

This release from the earth was naturally made easier for him by reason of the Seven Years' War and its consequences, which overshadowed the last years of his life. Indeed, he was not even disturbed by the soldiery, and said, with regard to the political events: "Oh what a great mercy it is when the change of themes, states, and places, brings about no change in our hearts, but we, with our spirit, remain unchanging in every place, that is, with God and His will."<sup>116</sup> These words were not spoken out of an unfeeling indifference to outward events: they reveal a Saintly perception which was higher than all earthly cares.

With serene patience did Tersteegen behold the activities of men, and, in this respect, was able to pronounce words of almost Socratic wisdom. His composure came from his nearness to God, which enabled him to say: "They should all be ashamed, who would make out that God is a tyrant and a hater of men. No, there is no anger in God excepting against evil; no, God did not create us in order to hate us or be hated by us; His one purpose was to love us, and be loved by us in eternity."<sup>117</sup> He was able to assert this, moreover, when he was ill and so short of breath that many a night he had to sit up the whole time. And even death came in stillness to this man. He received no sudden intimation of it; it was more like a gentle transition into eternity. One of Tersteegen's last utterances, before he fell asleep for ever, was a short soliloquy: "Oh thou poor and insignificant Lazarus! And yet the Angels are not ashamed to seize hold of thee!"

Was not this Saintly life of Tersteegen's impressive in its external immobility? In truth there is little which is more impressive than this existence in the stillness of God's presence. Its inward light and Divine peace are clearly not perceptible to everybody. It has the impressiveness of sunbeams which so often shine without being noticed at all. The most extraordinary feature of Tersteegen's life lies precisely in his rejection of anything extraordinary. Only the way in which this man followed the path of God, inwardly, is remarkable. Obviously Tersteegen is not the embodiment of the whole of Protestantism. The eternal protest against the impossibility of limiting something which is limited found no ex-

pression in him. But always to regard Protestantism purely as a protesting force, is merely seeing only one side of it. Tersteegen, with his Saintly life, enriched Protestantism profoundly. He is undoubtedly one of the most sublime expressions of German Protestantism, in which he reveals a soul which is characterised by its constant frankness regarding the Gospel. Tersteegen is the first manifestation of a new type of Saint who lives in the world as a genuinely Protestant layman, in order to shed the light of Eternity on to everyday life.





## Vianney, the Priest of Ars

1786—1859

### I

IN THE French literature of to-day the novels of Georges Bernanos occupy a peculiar position. Through nearly all of them there moves the figure of the Saint, about which the author's thought revolves; and few authors, without falling into dullness, have been able to depict the Saint with such frightening veracity as Bernanos has done. Through his underlying art it was granted to this Frenchman to lift the modern religious novel up to a spiritual level which the great part of literary production fails to attain. In Bernanos' great works the inner countenance of the Saint is revealed, and from it there streams forth the eternal light. For a real understanding of the Saint there is incomparably more to be learned from Bernanos' accounts than from the stylised lives of Saints, which, with their vainglorying, so often and so grievously sin against the spirit of humility. Bernanos represents the Saint in all his toiling, through which the inner joy still shines forth: "Every life which is beautifully spent, O Lord, bears witness unto Thee; but with the Saint, it is as though this proof were torn out of the living body with red-hot irons."<sup>1</sup> If we ask ourselves what model Bernanos had before him for the Abbé Chévance, the Abbé Donissan, and the author of the *Diary of a Country Priest*, we soon realise that it was none other than the priest of Ars; and indeed, according to the author's own words, "the fame of a certain other priest of Ars had reached" the Abbé Donissan.<sup>2</sup> Moreover he knowingly placed some of the famous Saint's sayings into the Abbé's mouth.<sup>3</sup> It is well worth noting the fact that the priest of Ars, an illiterate man to whom the name of Racine must always have been quite meaningless, and who never held any book of belles-lettres in his hand, should again and again have been used as a model by a modern French author. This was possible only with a figure like that of the Saint of Ars, whose greatness is in no way inferior to Bernanos' elaborations of it.

Jean Marie Baptiste Vianney, to give him his full name, was a religious personality of unusual force. He knew nothing about this and that, he knew only *one* thing. To the incomparable exclusion of everything else he addressed himself to the Divine. He accepted his obligation to holiness at an early age, and it took complete possession of him. Every word he uttered was spoken out of the world of religiousness. He brought to a conclusion an achievement which it would be hard for anyone to imitate. From this man there emanated an influence which cannot be overlooked, and the results of which cannot be contested even by scoffers.

From the purely external point of view he was far from being an imposing figure. In his threadbare cassock and his unpolished rustic shoes there was nothing prepossessing about him. The awkwardness of his nature was underlined rather than concealed. His appearance, which often bordered on the ludicrous, was totally lacking in dignity, and it is quite impossible to exalt the figure of the priest of Ars into anything superhuman. Unless we are to be guilty of giving a false impression of him, he must be described at once as a homely village *curé*. No other description of him conforms to the truth. There was even something of the idiot in him; and in the eyes of the world he was a simpleton who did not even understand what was to his own advantage.

We must reflect upon both these facts, the unusual religious gift, and the aspect, almost of idiocy, of Vianney, if we are to understand the curious impression which this man made upon his contemporaries. They were unable to classify him, and in the opinion of one free-thinker, "it is nauseating that this priest of Ars should make so bold as to disturb the nineteenth century."<sup>4</sup> In point of fact the existence of this man offers difficulties even to the modern mind, for he casts aside the conception which modern man has of the significant human. Vianney is the awkward intruder in an age which knows all about itself and pays homage to the ideal of unmetaphysical man; and with the priest of Ars a different, unknown reality moved into the centre of the stage, something which had meaning for few people in those days. The riddle with which he confronts one is only to be solved through the world of Saints. As an inspired idiot he emerges from that background to which the New Testament refers: "If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise."

## II

It will in no way contribute to a proper understanding of Vianney if we refer to his nationality and his century. The national landscape as a background is quite lacking in this life, as Ghéon noted.<sup>5</sup> In reading the history of his life one does not realise at all that he was a Frenchman. There was nothing of the specifically French mentality about him, and he might just as well have lived in England or Germany. He had much more in common with Brother Konrad of Parzheim, the Capuchin janitor from Bavaria, who was also spoken of as holy, than he had with the Marseillaise-singing French. The age in which he lived scarcely touched him. His childhood was passed in the period of the French Revolution, regarding the causes and problems of which he neither at the time nor later expressed any opinion at all. To make him out to have been an opponent of the Revolution is a quite unwarrantable magnification of his nature. On the other hand, Vianney never danced round the tree of liberty, nor was he affected by the storming of the Bastille. Only the closing of the churches and the muting of the bells, which the revolutionaries decreed, shocked the small boy. The religious services which were held in the utmost secrecy made an

indelible impression on his responsive soul. The conception of a persecuted Church was his legacy from the time of the Revolution. His later youth and the first years of manhood coincided with the period of the Napoleonic Empire. This period, too, passed over Vianney's head without leaving a trace, as the years of the Revolution had done. The violent Corsican, whose successes intoxicated the whole of France, made no impression whatsoever upon him. This usurper, the pulveriser of peoples, was scarcely even mentioned by him. It is difficult, indeed, to believe that Vianney and Napoleon were contemporaries.

Much more indicative of Vianney's nature is his rustic ancestry. His highly religious-minded family was distinguished for its beneficent activities. In his grandfather's house there had once stayed that Saint who, under the name of Joseph Labre, and at that time as an unknown beggar, knocked at men's doors, and who was one of the most wonderful figures of post-Tridentine Catholicism. Vianney's mother was a woman of great piety, and she led him into the way of religion at an early age. "I owe a debt to my mother," said the priest of Ars, and added, "virtue goes easily from mothers into the hearts of their children, who willingly do what they see being done."<sup>8</sup> Vianney was one of the many instances of those men who had before their eyes the model of a pious mother, whose influence can often last for a lifetime. He was a good-natured boy, with blue eyes and brown hair. In spite of his lively disposition, he admitted much later on in life, that "when I was young, I did not know evil; I was first acquainted with it in the confessional, from the mouths of sinners."<sup>7</sup> A spiritual virginity was his, and wickedness played no part in his nature, as in the case of Prince Myschkin in Dostoevski's novel, *The Idiot*. Vianney never got entangled in youthful follies. When a little girl, in childish innocence, made an allusion to a later alliance between them both, he recoiled from her in horror. The little Jean was a willing lad, fond of teasing, and possessed of a tranquil nature. In his earliest childhood he tended the cattle, and then, later, as a farmhand, performed from early morning until late evening all the tasks which a peasant life entails. Like so many religious figures, Vianney, too, arose from the peasant state in which the pious tradition was still firmly rooted. Intellectual problems and city manners were alien to him all his life. He was always a son of the land, which he never disowned in his personal appearance. As the son of peasants he had direct contact with the people; and from them he had that immense capacity for suffering at which one must always wonder in considering simple folk.

In a moment not particularly glorious for him his life emerged from the purely family circle, and assumed personal features of its own. Since Napoleon was in need of soldiers, the twenty-year old Vianney was called up. He was unable to buy his freedom by obtaining a substitute, and had no option but to sling a knapsack on his back. The crude, swearing jests of his fellow-recruits at the barracks distressed him greatly. Soon, however, he was despatched to Spain, but fell ill on the way there. His legs would no longer bear him, and he lost contact with the rest of the troops. In an

attempt to catch them up, he encountered a man who told him of a place of concealment in the Cevennes, and as the result of this Vianney became a deserter. In his intellectual torpor he did not consider the consequences of his action, and merely followed an innate instinct to find a place of safety. It was his first idiotic action, and in his ignorance, Vianney had landed himself in a most delicate situation. Yet he made no attempts, subsequently, to correct the position. The deserter spent the first months hiding in a stable, and later hid himself from the military police in a hayrick. For two whole years Vianney led an underground existence under the name of Jérôme Vincent. His father, an honourable man, was much exercised over his son's desertion, and besought him to present himself to the military authorities without delay. The son, however, rejected the paternal advice, and preferred to remain a deserter.

Understandably enough this unfortunate affair has caused embarrassment to more than one of his biographers. It was indeed a somewhat scandalous business. It would have been so much pleasanter if one had been able to show how in his youth the priest of Ars had been a brave soldier, filled with the noble patriotism which inspired Joan of Arc and Saint Louis. But the truth is quite the reverse. There is this dark patch in Vianney's life, which does not appear to fit in with one's notion of the man's holiness. To seek to excuse him by saying "everything has been distorted, and he has been abused," would be fair enough, but even so there is no point in glossing over Vianney's reprehensible conduct. Desertion is desertion, and nothing can get away from the fact. Patriotically inclined men are always bound to regard Vianney's desertion as highly censurable. But the religious man does not regard patriotism as the highest attitude, for to him it is lower than the Divine. Throughout his life Vianney displayed no interest whatsoever towards military events. They lay quite outside his field of vision. For this reason he was not aware of anything blameworthy in his action, and he never experienced the least regret for it. With all his awkwardness this simpleton realised even then the conflict between Christianity and warfare, and realised it much more clearly than those who believe that, in this respect, they can serve two masters.

Since, in the end, his youngest brother offered to take his place in the army, Vianney was struck off the list and able to crawl out of his hiding-place. But even in the next few years there is nothing favourable to report about him. Even before he had been called up, the young man had expressed a desire to become a priest. In view of his ingrained piety this wish is not surprising. It was, however, bluntly repudiated by his father, who was naturally unwilling to lose an able assistant in the work of the farm. A great deal of patient perseverance was necessary until his father's stern decision could be changed. Only when he was nineteen years old was he finally allowed to go to Balley, the parish priest of Ecully, to receive instruction. To this worthy man goes the honour of having been the first to have recognised Vianney's high calling. He did not permit himself an instant's doubt regarding this perception, and was quite undeterred by the

countless obstacles which lay in the path of the plan's fulfilment. The state of Vianney's knowledge, which he had acquired at the village school, was of the most primitive order, and he had not the gift of learning easily. Grammar presented the wretched youngster with immense difficulties, and his progress for a few months was negligible. Despite the greatest endeavours his untutored brain learned things very slowly, and it was even slower to retain what had been learned. Everything that he attempted to grasp ran straight through his memory like water through a sieve. Especially did Latin—the language of the Church—go in and out of his thick peasant's skull, however much the sturdy lad worried at it. His intellectual gifts were obviously just not up to it, for Vianney was on the border of mental infirmity. No wonder, then, that he lost heart, that he was seized with an aversion to all his school-books, and that he began to have doubts about his vocation. The young man was very near to giving up and returning to his plough, and it was only the persistence of his master which prevented him from doing so. Although the plan to become a priest was fanned by a spark of pride in Vianney's breast, the suffering of his studies would—without the intervention of the master—have extinguished it. The whole period of his studies was one of mortification to him. He himself sought to overcome his difficulties by practising ascetic piety. The student moved into the priest's house at Ecully as a servant, and in all humility devoted his spare time to sawing wood and digging in the garden. When the wearisome task of learning threatened to destroy his dream of becoming a priest, he undertook a long pilgrimage on foot, hoping that in this way he would be more deserving of an ability to study. This new method of learning Latin through piety, however, produced no noteworthy results.

Even after his desertion, when Vianney resumed his studies and entered a seminary, things were no better than before. His hope that in the meanwhile he would have matured and be more fitted for the intellectual demands of learning was a bitter disappointment to him. His experiences at the seminary were just as distressing to him as the lessons he had received from Balley. He did not lack willingness; he just had no intellectual ability at all. Although at that time the educational qualifications of those entering the priesthood were not excessive, Vianney was unable to master them. Nor was it only the gift of languages which he lacked: the dialectics of philosophy and Descartes' *Méthode* were as strange to him as the study of Latin. Philosophical instruction, indeed, made no impression on him, and he derived not the slightest benefit from the problems it raised. Vianney was not even able to grasp the bare elements of philosophy when they explained them to him in his native language—since naturally he was quite incapable of following the lectures in Latin. But although they attempted to explain the problems to him in the very simplest manner, he understood not an iota of what they were talking about. He stumbled over every lesson, and began stammering. Very often he did not even understand the questions his teachers put to him—and obviously he was even less able to answer them. Sometimes Vianney would stare helplessly at his

professors with his wide, ingenuous eyes, would bleat like a sheep, while the students who sat beside him on the bench would burst out into roars of laughter, and then, in deep humiliation, he would lower his eyes again. This inarticulate creature must indeed have presented a pitiful spectacle, and his sheer stupidity often brought his teachers to the borders of despair. Things were made no better by the fact that he obviously had no great aptitude for theology. To the seminary he was merely an intolerable burden, and to his fellow-students a laughing-stock. He received not the least consolation from anyone in this melancholy situation. Vianney admitted later that he had suffered "a little" at the seminary. "Those who know the reluctance with which he spoke of himself will have little difficulty in substituting the word 'cruelly' for 'a little';" wrote his first biographer.<sup>8</sup> The seminary's certificate placed on record that his conduct, his character, and his industry were good, but his educational attainments were described as "very weak."<sup>9</sup> Of what avail were the continual sadness of his countenance and the heartbreaking humility of his spirit in the face of his shortcomings? They could not make amends for his lack of learning, and in the end the professors gave up asking him any questions at all. They regarded his continued endeavour as quite pointless and urged him to leave the seminary. The suggestion was put to him with the very greatest reluctance, in view of the acute shortage of priests in France at that time. But there was no prospect whatever of being able to make any use of this idiot of a man. It was a terrible blow for Vianney, who was now twenty-nine years of age, to have to leave the seminary. It was a sore tribulation to him, after toiling so long like Sisyphus up a path which had brought him nothing but shame, to find the gate shut before him. For this same simpleton burned with a zeal to save souls. The situation offers a remarkable parallel to that of another Saint, Joseph of Copertino, who, by reason of his feeble talents, was never able to distinguish between white bread and brown, could not get accepted by any monastery, and yet was filled with such an overflowing grace, that he far surpassed anything which has been experienced in this field in modern times. With Vianney it was thanks only to the inflexibility of his father's friend, Balley, that he was not finally left out in the dark. On the intervention of this energetic priest, who, having had Vianney boarding with him, knew very much more about him, and who had perceived his religiousness, Vianney was at least granted the favour of being admitted to the examination. He completely lost his head, however, at the sight of the examination room, was hopelessly bewildered by everything, and, in his agitation, submitted answers which had nothing whatever to do with the questions. Purely because Vianney was described by the disapproving examiners as a "model of piety" did the Vicar-general, who was present, come to this generous decision: "Very well then, I shall call him. The grace of God will do the rest."<sup>10</sup> Vianney was handed over to the Bishop for ordination on condition, of course, "that the new priest should absolve sins in accordance with the opinion of his ecclesiastical superiors."<sup>11</sup> He was then handed back to Balley, as his vicar, so that he could pursue his studies; and three years later, after Balley's death,

Vianney was appointed to be the priest of Ars.

The meaning of Vianney's difficult years of study has never been properly understood. In order to avoid exhibiting the Saint's weaknesses too much, his lack of gifts has usually been considerably understated. There has even been talk of a legend, thus putting all the blame on to the course of time. Usually his lack of success has been explained by the fact that he began his schooling at a time when others have left their studies far behind them. And yet nothing is gained by these exculpatory explanations. Setting aside the fact that others have begun their studies even later on in life than he did, and brought them to a successful conclusion, the glossed-over version of Vianney's failures is entirely colourless and completely misses the inner meaning of them. No one who attempts to efface this peasant's stupidity, can ever have recognised the immense grace which illuminated his life. For, after all, there is nothing wonderful in the fact that a wise man should perform a great task in the world; but that a man whose intellectual gifts were so slight as to border on the idiotic should have eventually accomplished something which we must all respect, this is something which cannot at all be explained away on natural grounds. Vianney really was a complete dolt. His behaviour was not only due to his awkward clumsiness, he was mentally akin to the idiot. Vianney himself has referred to this infirmity in all candour: "What would you? I have learned nothing at studying," and added, "compared with the other priests I am like Brodier"—this was the name of an idiot boy of the neighbourhood.<sup>12</sup> Vianney regarded himself as a complete fool, and said of himself: "I am, really! Look at what a blockhead I am!"<sup>13</sup> This was no mask of folly which he assumed: it was *sancta simplicitas*. The qualities which he lacked, and which made Vianney such a pitiful figure, provide, at the same time, irrefutable evidence of the fact that holiness does not lie on the same plane as the gifts of the intellect. There are religious qualifications which are quite independent of the power of understanding. A man who is intellectually weak can perform tasks of which wisdom is incapable. Religiousness is not attained by the way of reason, but intuitively, and is available to all men. For this reason Vianney's strange life may be very simply summed up: Providence made use of this blockhead. And this is the deepest secret of the priest of Ars! From this fact it may be concluded that God availed himself of such a feeble person in order to demonstrate that the great work is not to be ascribed to the powers of men. In the midst of the rationalist age the divine nature appeared in the garb of an idiot, and God permitted that the greatest priest whom France produced in the nineteenth century should at first have been regarded by the Church as unworthy of the priesthood. Viewed in this light the glorification of the idiot has nothing scandalous about it. For although Vianney was feeble-minded, his simplicity had its own melody. Thanks to his foolish intellectual outlook he lived in accordance with a totally unusual hypothesis, which it is difficult to specify, and yet which is reflected throughout his strange life. This fool in Christ, in his transparent candour, had, moreover, not a trace of that sly craftiness which would necessarily be the destruction of

Christendom. Vianney belonged, rather, to those poor in spirit to whom Jesus, astonishingly enough, granted the Kingdom of Heaven in the beatitudes, and of whom the Lord, in an incomprehensible utterance, said: "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes."

### III

The little hamlet of Ars lies about twenty-two miles north of Lyons on the Dombes plateau. At that time the inhabitants amounted to barely two hundred and thirty persons, who lived in brick houses with thatched roofs. After the events of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic disorders and confusion, even this little nest, so far off the beaten track, was infected unpleasantly by the post-war mentality. Morals had been relaxed and religious life had suffered severely. The four taverns were always filled to overflowing, and the village girls gave themselves up with ardour to the delights of dancing. The moral state of the community at that time has been thus described: "Nobody at Ars would have dreamed of stealing a penny from his neighbour's purse; but very few had any qualms of conscience about swindling their purchasers when selling them live-stock, or in so wrapping up the bundles of hemp that the bad pieces were hidden from view. Fathers would laugh when their children came home with their aprons filled with stolen turnips."<sup>14</sup> The villagers of Ars, in fact, were just as people are wont to be after a series of demoralising events.

It was not, therefore, a special honour to become the priest of this small parish. The bishop, however, considered the place appropriate for a priest who was not conspicuous for his gifts, and, for his part, Vianney was not in the least put out at the insignificance of Ars. Yet he was soon to develop so greatly in this field of action, that for most men he completely lost his surname, and went down to history as "the priest of Ars." As the son of a peasant he quickly made contact with the country-folk. As soon as Vianney understood the religious situation of his new territory, he resolved to take up arms against the spiritual neglect which was so prevalent.

Like all young hotspurs he attacked the population with the utmost rigour, for there was something of the zealot in the new parish-priest of Ars. He would tolerate no sort of amusement, and, in his simplicity, he interpreted moral requirements quite literally. The people of Ars were at first completely astounded by the harshness of his behaviour. Even the pious families in the village had difficulty in accustoming themselves to Vianney's rigorous ways. On the taverns and the young people's craze for dancing he declared unrelenting war. The rustic amusements of country-folk as they are described in the stories of Jeremias Gotthelf—without any prejudice, and purely from the point of view of folklore—were completely foreign to Vianney's nature. He did not understand them in the very least. A dictum like "he who loves men loves also their joys," is unthinkable with Vianney. The holiness of joy and celebration, as it is indicated in the marriage at Cana in the Gospel according to Saint John, was completely

strange to him. He saw no need whatever for a whole community to rejoice. In this respect he did not have the same view as that held by the genial teacher of youth, Don Bosco, who even as a Saint knew how to relax with young people. To the priest of Ars the most innocent distraction might lead to sin, against which he sought to shield the souls entrusted to his care. Like a second Savonarola, he cursed dancing as "the scented sin," and, in his almost fanatical attitude to it, he would not rest until he had outlawed even the most innocent of jollifications from his parish. He was quite capable of paying the musicians, out of his own pocket, the sum which they had arranged with the tavern-keeper, so long as they would pack up their instruments forthwith and leave the village at once. In this connection the priest often becomes little more than an obscurantist, to whom all generous understanding was unknown.

It is probable that Vianney was not permeated only by this zealous harshness—which he shares with many other young priests. Instinctively, and quite rightly, people find such an attitude exaggerated. That, in the case of the priest of Ars, the people did not feel themselves frankly repelled, and that the grumbling against him died away, is to be ascribed in great part to his kindness of heart. Possibly his kindness and generosity may be connected with his mental infirmity, which did not permit him to realise the value of money and left him defenceless in the face of men's lust for lucre. Vianney was exceptionally liberal. Even though he did not worry himself unduly about the social question as we understand it to-day, his heart was at all times open to the needs of his fellow-men. The afflictions of the poor moved him greatly, and he could not pass their miseries by and remain indifferent. He was dogged unceasingly by his people's poverty. It was for this reason that the priest of Ars gave away all he had, so that he retained not a single possession of his own. The ingenuous priest interpreted literally Jesus' injunction to have but one coat, and he shared out his few goods and chattels so completely that he himself was left in want of many things. He possessed nothing more than what he wore on his person. His emoluments, his clothes, his food—everything, in fact—all found their way to someone else. Vianney was capable of taking off his shoes and stockings in the street to give them to some starving beggar, and of walking home barefoot himself. He even exchanged his best hose behind a hedge with a beggar. This burning compassion, which far surpasses a reasonable pleasure in giving, is an unmistakable indication of Vianney's sheer Christianity. Although the wiseacres may proclaim his boundless charity as the conduct of an idiot, it does reveal the wealth of love which filled the man. Like Vincent de Paul, the priest of Ars, too, was filled with great pity for the number of abandoned children, and as a remedy for their distress, he founded an orphanage which he called "Providence Home." He conjured it up, as it were, out of the air, without any means at his disposal; and for its maintenance he had constantly to pray to God. The people of Ars soon saw that through their priest a new reality was appearing, one which was different from that in which they had always dwelt before.

The association of harshness and generosity had an inexplicable result. To this must be ascribed the fact that this ignorant priest, who only after much toil and trouble had been admitted to the priesthood, achieved something which many priests would like to have done, but which is granted to scarcely any. Not over night, but little by little, the tiny hamlet underwent a change. The people of Ars were unable to remain aloof for long from the grace which radiated from the remarkable personality of their priest. It took Vianney ten whole years to renew Ars, but the community changed so noticeably and to such an extent that it was observed even by outsiders. There was no more working on Sundays, the church was filled more and more every year, and drunkenness fell off. In the end the taverns had to close their doors since they had no more customers; and even domestic squabbles abated. Honesty became the principal characteristic. "Ars is no longer Ars," as Vianney himself wrote; for it had undergone a fundamental change. Under his guidance the little village became a community of pious people, to whom all his labours were directed. It is truly astounding to reflect upon what Vianney, with a staff of trained assistants, was able to achieve in the village in the space of a few years. What an immense amount of endeavour underlay his work will best be appreciated by anyone who has had to convert only a few drunkards to sanity. Many a time does it seem that it would be simpler to overturn a mountain than to raise up men who have fallen by the way. At Ars, however, a whole village was transformed, so radically indeed, that there were afterwards no good men and bad men, since they had all, without exception, become as new. This tremendous achievement is like a miracle, and the attentive reader may judge of its greatness in *Leonard and Gertrude*.

Naturally the sermons played their part in all this, and Vianney applied the greatest exertions in composing them, especially in the choice of text, for naturally it was his aim to be understood by his people. While he frequently addressed them on death and the last Judgment, he also sought to rouse them from apathy. He never inveighed against other religious creeds. The apathetic Catholic was Vianney's principal objective. He used forcible language in lashing out at half-hearted Christians. He made no bones about haranguing his congregation in the following terms from the pulpit: "Some are addressing their minds to their worldly affairs, others to their amusements; there is a man down here fast asleep, and that one over there is bored to desperation; there is somebody moving his head about, and someone else yawning; another one is scratching himself, and somebody is flipping over the pages of his book; and the rest are all wondering if this service is going to end soon."<sup>15</sup> Not just once did he thunder at his parishioners in this way, similar outbursts are to be found in nearly all his sermons. They became almost a second nature to him, and gave the characteristic stamp to the sermons of his earlier years. At the same time, these often blustering sermons have no particular note of their own, as may be seen from the volumes of them which were published after his death. They are rigorously moralising village sermons and contain no new interpretations of the old truths. Neither in substance nor in language do

they arrest us. What Vianney preached was said before and has been said since his time by countless priests in exactly the same words; and he says nothing but that people should heed the sermons to the best of their ability. Thus it cannot have been chiefly due to his sermons that Ars was renovated in such an amazing manner. The merit cannot have been due to the sermons alone anyway since not infrequently the priest of Ars would stop short while still in the pulpit. The lack of talents was making itself felt again. Vianney was not one of those great preachers who can always wield the word of God like a spiritual sword with unfailing might. What an exasperating impression must the attentive congregation of Ars have received when their zealous preacher, in the midst of his violent gesticulations was suddenly deserted by his memory, and, quite simply, had no more to say! Such painful occurrences befell Vianney again and again, and there was nothing for it but to end the service and to climb down dejectedly from the pulpit. This embarrassing picture of a preacher suddenly stricken dumb is that of the priest of Ars. And yet these disastrous ineptitudes did not damage his holy zeal in the very least; the only consequence was that Vianney would redouble his endeavours in the preparation of his sermons.

The explanation of this mysterious transformation of the village of Ars must be sought elsewhere. What very few men in their whole lives only come near to understanding, was completely grasped, in a remarkable manner, by this foolish simpleton: that a man must always begin with himself, and that even the rebirth of a community can only be achieved by its renewing itself. We must expect nothing of men which is not already embodied within them. On the basis of this perception Vianney set to work, in the first place upon himself, so that he could attain the ideal which he demanded of his parishioners in his own person. He took his own religious obligations with the greatest seriousness, and did not care whether the people noticed this or not. And finally the inhabitants of Ars said to each other: "Our priest always does what he says himself; he practises what he preaches. Never have we seen him allow himself any form of relaxation."<sup>16</sup>

At a time when the village was wrapped in sleep, it was Vianney's practice to get up. "At two o'clock in the morning he stood up and prayed. At four o'clock he was in the church for the offering of the Holy Sacrament. He did not leave the church until about noon."<sup>17</sup> Every day he prayed to God to convert his community, and would moisten the flagstones of the church with his tears. This continual praying did not keep him from his activities, but enables his whole work to arise out of the consciousness of a spiritual union with God. But the people of Ars received an increasingly more forcible impression of him: "This man is not as others are."<sup>18</sup>

Side by side with his praying, the priest of Ars was accustomed to practise an intense asceticism. None of his acts removed him further from the nineteenth century than his ascetic activities. The last century devoted itself by every conceivable means to making man's existence more and more comfortable, even though, in the course of this endeavour, he sank

ever lower and lower into a soulless well-being. Modern thought sees in asceticism merely a pointless self-tormenting, or else takes refuge in explanations about it. Such an interpretation is clearly inappropriate to the attitude of the priest of Ars, for it can only obstruct one's approach to him; and similarly so if one speaks of Jansenist tendencies. All these attitudes are far from coming near to the essence of Vianney, for the explanation of his asceticism lies on a different plane.

The priest of Ars subjected himself to a strict fast. In this way he sought to reduce the requirements of his life to a minimum. One meal sufficed him for the whole day. He forswore all wine, and normally ate only a little black bread and one or two potatoes cooked in water: he would prepare sufficient of these to last him the whole week, keeping them in an earthenware pan, and often they were covered with a coating of mould. Frequently he fasted for a whole day until, overcome, he would collapse from physical weakness. In view of this mode of life he had no need, of course, of a housekeeper—apart from the fact that his house stood almost empty anyway. Since he considered that his self-mortification was all too inadequate, he had a special penitential garment made, which he wore next the skin, and which, by reason of the constant friction against his body, was soon stained a reddish brown. For the most part he slept on a bare mattress—when he was not sleeping on a bundle of faggots down in the cellar.

The height of all this asceticism was Vianney's bedroom, into which one almost hesitates to enter. And yet the very first sight of the deserted room enables one to understand the priest of Ars in all his profundity. On his deathbed his spiritual father, Balley, had bequeathed to him all his penitential instruments—what a heritage!—and these were not allowed to lie neglected by the priest of Ars. With an iron-tipped scourge, which he would wear out in the space of two weeks, he was in the habit—like the Trappists—of lashing his naked back mercilessly every day until the blood began to spurt out and he collapsed to the ground with a dull moan. Although he was at great pains to keep his extraordinary castigations secret from the rest of the world, the dreadful cracking of the whip could be clearly heard in the vicinity throughout the quietness of the night. Even to-day flecks of blood on the bare walls of the bedroom in the priest's house at Ars bear witness to the furious battles that were once fought out there. One cannot but be profoundly moved on beholding them, and it is hard to repress a shudder. One is horrified at the wild war which Vianney waged against his own body; one feels oppressed, and uneasy.

The impression which one receives from this nineteenth century sanctuary cannot readily be put into words. The healthy common sense of normal man feels irritated by it, and one is assailed by a whole host of objections, that such a mortification goes too far, that it is extravagant, that it parodies human dignity, that it borders upon masochism. Even the pious biographers of the priest of Ars did not understand his attitude, and for this reason they state that "his mortification of the flesh is rather to be marvelled at than imitated,"<sup>19</sup> for he had overstepped normal bounds. And in point of fact, only a man who was intellectually poor could

have followed such a course in the nineteenth century. Yet this practice of Vianney's, which approaches sheer folly, bears a striking resemblance to the words of Jesus: "Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting." Vianney did not scourge himself for his own amusement, he sought to do penance for the guilty. His asceticism was an act of expiation for others. "My friend, here is my cure: I shall give you a small penance, and the rest I shall do for you myself," said the priest of Ars.<sup>20</sup> This act of expiation on behalf of his parish is the meaning underlying the frightful self-mortification which he practised. Whoever considers the blood-flecked walls of Vianney's bedroom for any length of time, and reflects upon them again and again, will suddenly realise that the solution to the mystery of the transformation of Ars is to be found conclusively in the fantastic battles of penance which were played out in this memorable room. What went on here wrought the complete renovation of the village. And yet this illogical event cannot be understood. It is and it remains a secret; for it belongs to that region of which it is said, "Let him who can understand it, do so."

The priest of Ars had a second goal which he sought to attain through his heroic asceticism. The only subject-matter which Vianney really grasped in the course of his education was the legend of saintliness. He read so much and so long on this theme, and became so intoxicated by the wonderful world it portrayed that suddenly he seemed himself to have walked out of the pages of the book as an incarnation of the legendary figures. The ideal of holiness enchanted him. This was the theme which underlay his sermons, but which he often expressed so awkwardly that one might well think he was talking of morality instead of holiness. "We must practise mortification. For this is the path which all the Saints have followed," said Vianney from the pulpit.<sup>21</sup> He placed himself in that great tradition which leads the way to holiness through personal sacrifice. "If we are not now Saints, it is a great misfortune for us; therefore we must be so. But so long as we have no love in our hearts we shall never be Saints."<sup>22</sup> The Saint, to him, was not an exceptional man before whom we should marvel, but a possibility which was open to all Christians, even to a feeble village priest who could not get on at the seminary. Unmistakably did Vianney declare in his sermons that "to be a Christian and to live in sin is a monstrous contradiction. A Christian must be holy."<sup>23</sup> Vianney, whose acquaintance with theology was meagre, had by no means normal perceptions about holiness. With his Christian simplicity he had clearly thought much on these things and understood them intuitively, with his heart, while they are usually denied to the understanding of educated men. Vianney drew special attention to the fact that in the Bible no reference is made to any miracles performed by John the Baptist, Mary, or Joseph. "Thus you see that holiness does not consist in doing great things, but in truly obeying the commandments of God, and in fulfilling His instructions according to the condition in which He has been pleased to place us."<sup>24</sup> For the priest of Ars there was one goal only—to follow the Saints. Everything else seemed pale to him compared with this. "We must never lose sight of the fact that we are either Saints or outcasts, that we must live

for Heaven or for Hell; there is no middle path in this."<sup>25</sup> Vianney himself moved irresistibly nearer to a state of holiness. And the people of Ars began to realise more and more vividly, "Our priest is a Saint!" And it was before the Saint and not the zealot that they bowed down. It was the hidden Saint in Vianney who brought about the transformation of the village, as a peasant of Ars once said: "Oh, we are no different from other people. But we would be utterly ashamed if we were to commit such sins with a Saint in our midst."<sup>26</sup>

The holiness of the priest of Ars had nothing of inaccessible grandeur about it, it had the effect of making him extremely feeble, which was to be expected in the case of an idiot, and was in conformity with the Gospel. Vianney trod the way of holiness in fear and trembling. Striking evidence of the drama which was being enacted in his spirit is provided by the fear of death which lay upon him when, at the age of fifty-seven, a serious illness brought him to the edge of the grave. This does not seem to fit in with the picture of a Saint, and yet the fact cannot be denied that the priest of Ars was unable to look on death with untroubled eye. The wretched man, when the doctor told him that he had not long to live, was filled with a terrible fear of God's judgment of him. Vianney found it terrifying that he should have to stand before God within the space of a few minutes, and to appear before Him empty-handed. He could not adapt himself to such an awful fate, and he implored God from his heart, "Oh Lord, if I am still useful here, then take me not yet out of this world."<sup>27</sup> And Vianney's trembling prayer for a reprieve was hearkened. His stark fear of death shows the great weakness in which the whole life of the priest of Ars was steeped. It put into miraculous reality the words which are written in the second Epistle to the Corinthians: "For when I am weak, then am I strong."

#### IV

The conversion of a whole parish was too unusual an occurrence for it to remain unknown. It must have been the comment of the whole region. After a few years the priest of Ars was not just a local celebrity, the fame of his name spread far beyond the borders of his community. Nearly everybody noted the unusualness of this man in one way or another, and realised that such a person is not to be found beneath every cassock. The priest of Ars exercised a magical power of attraction over the inhabitants of the surrounding villages, who began coming to Ars in ever-increasing numbers. As is always the case in Church history where a true religious fountain springs up, thither do the people flock to quench their thirsty souls. From the year 1827 there began the famous stream of pilgrims to Ars which only ceased with Vianney's death. People went to Ars from all parts of France, from Belgium, from England, and even from America. They went in their crowds—peasants, merchants, prefects, professors, noblemen, priests—without the need of any newspaper or writing to propagate his fame. The stream of people grew ever greater from year to year and finally was measured in thousands. Two mail coaches were run daily between Lyons

and Ars, purely for the benefit of the pilgrims, so that one may rightly speak of "pilgrimages." In the end between eighty and a hundred thousand persons made the pilgrimage every year to the insignificant little village where Vianney lived. Although this mighty stream of men doubtless consisted in part of the merely curious, the phenomenon cannot be attributed to a purely passing whim since it lasted for no less than thirty years!

It is no easy thing to assess this stream of pilgrims. The vast number of them, which has bewildered most of the biographers, means nothing much in itself. A sheer mass means nothing. It would have been more tranquil if there had been fewer. As is usual with all places of pilgrimage, the business of religion cropped up—which is always vexatious. Not that this brought any material profit to the priest of Ars. There is no question of this. He remained the simple *curé*, who, occasionally, walked through the village-square with a milk-jug in his hand, and the round Abbé's hat on his head, so that the people who had travelled so far to see him were often disappointed when they beheld him for the first time. Many people could not imagine that this rather foolish-looking man with his thick spectacles and shapeless shoes (which he always mended himself) could be the famous priest of Ars. Although it did not affect Vianney, the people of Ars drove a thriving trade with the influx of visitors. Hotels sprang up for the accommodation of the pilgrims, and his portrait was sold in all the shops. The cult which grew up around him, and which caused many to indulge in pious thieving—such as furtively snipping off a piece of his cassock as a holy relic—was extremely distasteful to his attitude of humility. Yet it was not within his power to put a stop to it. The overcharged atmosphere of a place of pilgrimage was there and would not be suppressed. Men began whispering about miracles which the Saint had wrought, although he specifically denied it.<sup>28</sup> It is not worth our while to pause too long beside these phenomena which were a tiresome if inevitable result of the pilgrimage.

The principal motive which led all these crowds of pilgrims to the priest of Ars was purely the desire to be confessed by him, and to receive spiritual counsel from him. Although all the pilgrims, of course, could be confessed wherever they lived yet they would often make a troublesome journey in order to be confessed by the priest of Ars, even when they sometimes had to wait for thirty, fifty, or even seventy hours, before they could enter the confessional. This is the more remarkable in that Vianney had no knowledge whatever of the modern mentality—which perhaps is not so important as it occasionally appears to be to modern eyes—nor had he the time to devote himself to individual spiritual guidance as Francis de Sales had done. The press of people was too great to permit Vianney to be able to confer with each individual with that thoroughness which would have been desirable. The confessional at Ars was by no means an anticipation of an hour of modern psychoanalysis. And yet, while Balzac and Stendahl were writing their great psychological novels in France, men went in their multitudes to consult the idiot priest of Ars. Again we are

confronted by the riddle of the impossible: the extraordinary power of attraction which this scarcely sane man was able to exercise. Moreover the priest of Ars never had any particular revelation to make. He had not the least interest in anything unconnected with religion. He knew nothing of the beauty of Hellas, of the profound thought of India, of scientific achievements, or, in fact, of anything else which makes an impression on modern man. It is open to question, indeed, in view of his introspection, if he ever noticed the fragrant blossoms of the elder-trees which stood outside his house. It has been placed on record that "not once did he express the wish to see the railway, which passed by only a few kilometres distant from Ars, and brought him such a quantity of pilgrims every day."<sup>29</sup> In spite of this unmodern outlook, Vianney steadily attracted the throngs of people to Ars, to a place where there was nothing whatever worth looking at save for this simple village priest whose insignificance could hardly be surpassed. There is, of course, no scientific explanation of this fact. It can only be understood when we regard it in the light of the holiness which streamed out of the priest of Ars.

The result of all this great concourse of people visiting his confessional was a severe burden to Vianney himself. Regarding the hearing of confessions, outsiders usually have a false impression. They suppose that the confessor has the opportunity of hearing all sorts of interesting information, confessions, and secrets. In reality it is not at all easy to be able to take in the murmured monotone of sentences learned off by heart, which is apt to make one sleepy, and which normally does very little to reveal a man's spiritual condition. The simple man of the people is scarcely able to give more than the barest outline of his hidden, inward life. The priest of Ars heard these monotonous confessions from countless people with the greatest attention, and invariably picked out the critical question which was muddled in with the mechanical mumbling. He dealt both with the bored young men whose scruples are satisfied with a bare answer, and with those unreal people who deliberately think out "interesting questions," in order to be able to have a longer conversation with their confessor. Vianney not only had to put up with all these inadequacies—like all other priests—they became in the end almost unendurable. In view of the enormous crowds, moreover, he had eventually to spend a full sixteen or eighteen hours a day, wedged with cramped limbs in an unmoving position in the darkness of the confessional, receiving into himself all the miserable sins of men. All too rarely do we take into account the spiritual torture that this involves. One must imagine oneself in a similar situation in order to realise its grievousness. In truth, Vianney was a veritable martyr to the confessional, for he would sit in it for hours on end throughout the summer heat, and equally long in the coldness of winter, although there was no sort of heating. Since his church was literally packed with people from early morning until late at night he scarcely ever had the amount of sleep he required. From now on the priest of Ars spent by far the greater part of his life within this confined space, listening to the poor mortals who first would, and then would not, and then when they would

once more, found that they could not. . . . And all these pitiful souls, longed to receive, through Vianney, at least one instant of the light of God, even though afterwards they would be washed away by the stream of life.

The reason which drove all these unknown people to Vianney's thronged confessional was the longing to meet once and for all a priest who knew all about the reality of the soul. The priest of Ars possessed the ability to see the human soul in its nakedness, freed of its body. This grace is only rarely bestowed on men. Vianney never put his nose into the spiritual affairs of other people. He was entirely free from inquisitiveness. Like Francis de Sales, he had the gift of "seeing everything and not looking at anyone." In confessing people this strange man, who had a fundamental knowledge of sin, strove after *one* thing only: to save souls. This was his ardent desire, and for the sake of it he suffered all the tortures of his daylong confinement in the confessional. In order to save souls one must be possessed of that holy love of men which consumed the priest of Ars. He would often weep in the confessional, and when he was asked why he wept he would reply: "My friend, I weep because you do not weep."<sup>30</sup> This passionate longing to save souls had the effect of making the formerly ardent zealot more and more gentle. Following on the example of Christ, he recognised that sinful man needs love above all things. "The Saints were gentle-hearted," he would say, and a mild gentleness illuminated the declining years of the priest of Ars. "To bear nothing more of man than his suffering" was his resolve.<sup>31</sup> Vianney possessed the gift of being able to understand the soul of a man in an instant, and without any lengthy explanations, to feel at once what spiritual trouble was afflicting it. How well did he understand the wayward, pusillanimous heart of man! With a very few words he knew how to bring comfort to the sorely tempted soul, he swiftly and decisively answered the most complicated questions of conscience, and gave counsels which invariably revealed a complete understanding of the situation in question. The priest of Ars penetrated right into the emotions and feelings of his spiritual children and could read their souls as though in a book. He had a clear-sighted vision which often enabled him to foretell to a man what would happen to him in the future. This intuitive understanding overpowered the people who visited his confessional, and to whom he granted a word of pardon. The most significant aspect of this Saint is his religiousness. That is why the riddle of Ars cannot be solved scientifically. It does not lie on the plane of the intellect. Rather should we note the religious aura of the man. The secret is to be found in the atmosphere which surrounded him, which was poor to the point of dreariness, and yet from which there arose infinite comfort. If we can perceive this miracle, then we shall be on the way to a proper understanding of the priest of Ars.

There will always be something incomprehensible about the fact that the simple priest, to whom the Church authorities in the first place forbade the hearing of confessions, since they could not rely upon his ability in the field of casuistic discrimination, should have become the greatest father confessor of France in the nineteenth century. This paradoxical state of

affairs can scarcely be explained otherwise than by admitting that the priest of Ars was a man inspired. This idiot, directly inspired by God, possessed, despite the slightness of his intellectual attainments, a deeper knowledge than that which they sought to teach him in the seminary. It is a mystery before which we can only bow our heads, for such inspiration cannot be described in mere words. When a nun once said to him, "Father, they say that you are an ignorant man," he replied serenely, "They have not deceived you, my child; but it is of no consequence, and regardless of it, I shall give you more counsels than they will do."<sup>32</sup> People who were closely associated with him admit to having heard from his lips things which they had never heard elsewhere, nor read in any book. It was this inspiration, and nothing else, which drew the people to Ars. Direct inspiration is the prerogative of the Saints.

The great concourse of people who beset the priest of Ars will always be stressed as a great success. But Christian thought has never regarded success as a real reward from God, and in all probability the great streams of pilgrims form the most questionable aspect of Vianney's life. That the multitudes of visitors were not ill-received was due to the personality of the Saint, who, however, in the midst of all this successful activity looked on himself with the same unchanging humility. To a man who had not been divinely inspired, it would have been a matter of self-complacency—which is natural to all human beings—and the enormous pilgrimages would have turned his head, and would have led him into conceit. But in the midst of the unique concourse of people the priest of Ars was more than ever convinced of his own insufficiency. He had once besought God in a prayer to let him behold his own insignificance. Requests such as this are usually granted, but Vianney beheld something which he could scarcely comprehend. It must have been something truly horrible, for he felt as though he had been utterly crushed. This looking into the abyss of his own insignificance, his nothingness, is not to be confused with mere feelings of inferiority. It was all very much deeper, something which is only accessible to the Saint. He, who knew how to bring such wonderful comfort to others, remained without any comfort at all; and he was amazed that God should suffer him to remain upon the earth at all. "This sight of my nothingness I had for eighteen months. Yet because I was troubled that it would finally lead me into despondency, I besought God to take it away from me once more: and this He really did."<sup>32</sup>

## V

Parallel to the great influx of pilgrims into Ars are the strange tribulations which Vianney had to endure. They are not easy to understand, and yet they complete the portrait of the priest of Ars.

The first sign of hostility came from his professional brethren. It is no improper simplification of the problem to explain the conflict of the clergy with the Saint of Ars by sheer jealousy, since they could not bring themselves to acknowledge Vianney's religious greatness. It was indeed

true that there was no lack of envy, but the clerical attitude cannot be attributed to this motive alone. The local priests really did find themselves faced with a situation which they had certainly never experienced before. Vianney's personality simply did not fit into any prearranged scheme of things. His colleagues considered that the way in which he even neglected his clothing was an intentional attempt at achieving originality, and they accused him of extravagant behaviour. But when the steady stream of pilgrims began, they were confronted by a wholly inexplicable fact. Why should the spiritual counsels of the priest of Ars exercise such a tremendous influence? Could not the people receive the same absolution in their own parishes? Was it not Vianney who had been the seminarist who with much expenditure of exertion had learned only a little Latin, and who, on account of his mental incapacity, had had to leave the seminary? And this intellectual weakling now sought to play the Saint! Did he not realise that his excessive asceticism merely provoked a mocking shrug of the shoulders, and thus imperilled the fair repute of the clergy? They could not criticise him enough: they censured, abused, reproached, and vilified him slanderously. His brother clergy warned their own parishes against the pilgrimages to Ars. Vianney later said, regarding this period of persecution: "At that time they left the Gospel in peace in the pulpit, and instead of it they preached against the poor priest of Ars."<sup>34</sup> But he suffered grievously from these onslaughts, much more so than he allowed it to appear. That they should have come from his own colleagues, who, to all appearances, lacked any authority in this respect, hurt him. For all that, the priest of Ars was only an uneducated priest. Why it had pleased God to make use of his unworthiness he himself knew least of all. But Vianney would not allow himself to become embittered. He regarded his persecution as something sent by God in order to instil humility into him. He freely endured it as something which had been ordained and about which he should not complain. Only an attitude of submission can turn persecution to spiritual advantage and thus neutralise it. In the end, however, even his professional brethren had to see the groundlessness of their malicious rumours, particularly when the bishop stood up to defend the priest of Ars, and said to an assembly of priests: "I do but wish, Gentlemen, that you yourselves had just a little of this folly which you find so amusing: it would do your wisdom no harm at all."<sup>35</sup>

Much more fundamental than the wounding sneers of the clergy were the vexations of the Devil, which Vianney had to endure; for the Devil was his shameful companion throughout his life. When we come to explain this we find that the Devil played a far from nebulous role in the life of the priest of Ars. With Satan, to whom he gave the name of "Grappin," he came into real contact; and he believed the Christian was to be pitied who "had not fought fiercely with the Devil."<sup>36</sup> By night Vianney would hear eerie sounds in his house. His night's rest, indeed, must have been badly disturbed, for the bed curtains were torn down, and the pictures which hung in the room were smeared with dirt. He heard frightful knockings on the door, and monstrous screams in the courtyard outside—sometimes

these took the form of the growling of a bear, or the baying of a hound, or the fluttering of the wings of bats. Within his room he was abused as a "potato-eater" by an unknown voice, and he saw his furniture being moved about the room; frequently it all reached the pitch of a veritable witches' sabbath. "Vianney often felt as though a hand were passing over his face, and as if rats were running over his body."<sup>37</sup> For many years did the priest of Ars have violent fights with Satan, who even seized hold of his feet and dragged him round the room. These Satanic struggles open up a deep abyss, of which very few men can have the barest conception. According to Vianney "the most terrible temptation is not to be tempted; such is the condition of those whom the Devil is preparing for Hell."<sup>38</sup>

Should not these experiences of Vianney's be regarded as unintelligent superstitions, scarcely to be taken seriously by a sane, rationalistic man? Obviously these struggles with the Devil are just as unmodern as anything could be. It was felt that they seriously disturbed the modern feeling about life. Even in the lifetime of the priest of Ars there were shouts of laughter from the neighbouring clergy when it was learned that Vianney was haunted by the Devil. Indeed, his colleagues said of him that "the Hell from which his demons came, was quite simply the stewpan in which his potatoes went mouldy."<sup>39</sup> To the scientifically educated theologians of the time Satan was purely an embarrassment to be regarded as the conception of a madman, with which one could do nothing. Was it not significant that Vianney's vicar, despite his having listened strenuously, had heard nothing whatever of these strange sounds? And so people were disposed to ascribe the affair to Vianney's overwrought nerves and his mental perversity, which was not to be wondered at in the case of a madman.

It is not particularly advantageous, however, to believe that it was just Vianney's nervous constitution taking hallucinations to be real happenings. This free-thinking attitude overlooks the fact that the mediaeval conception of a bodily Devil touches only on the problem of form and has nothing to do with the nature of the demon himself. For, according to the New Testament, "we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." The great painters, Grünewald, Bosch, and Breughel, have depicted the Devil who fought with the desert fathers more congenially than do the moderns. At the same time that Vianney in the priest's house at Ars was being visited by the Devil in his sleep, the Protestant pastor, Christoph Blumhardt, was sustaining battles of prodigious fury with the Devil in Möttlingen, battles which are counted among the most fundamental events in nineteenth century Church history. Perhaps the irruption of the Demonic in modern times is only possible in this monstrous degree, because man, in his proud rationalism has become so unwatchful.

The soul, which stretches up into the region of light, is also in touch with the infernal powers who seek to snatch it down. Only the half-hearted Christian is spared these experiences. Nearly all the Saints, as the opponents of nihilism, have had to fight with the Demon, for to the

human imbued with extraordinary grace, it is possible to withstand extraordinary menaces. The error which must be resisted begins, in the first place, when belief in the Devil gives rise to a complete demonology which does not recognise the fundamental triumph of the Gospel over the powers of darkness. The reality of the demonic powers is not affected by rejecting the materialistic interpretation of them as an inconceivable image. And indeed, Vianney's fight with Satan is, in the last analysis, to be regarded as an inward, spiritual experience, which becomes just as much of a reality as do external events. Whether the Devil was actually inside him or outside him is of secondary importance: what matters is that he really did fight with it. Evil is to be understood as both reality and unreality—which can be described but not explained. Only such a paradox can approach the mystery of the supernatural powers.

As a man who was acquainted with the fundamental experience, the priest of Ars had a profound aversion to all busy activity, to that "un-Christian rushing to and fro" as Paul Gerhardt once expressed it in a poem. Silence, and withdrawing into oneself, seemed to the Saint of Ars to be a higher stage than uninterrupted creating and constant activity. A violent longing for stillness took possession of him. He felt a lively desire to spend the rest of his life in cloistered solitude, and to devote himself exclusively to prayer and mortification; and this is a characteristic of the Saint. The position of being the parish-priest of Ars was too noisy for him, and he would willingly have set aside his burden. "One should not remain a preacher until the end of one's life; one should have a little time in which to prepare oneself for dying," said Vianney, and added later: "I would not die as a priest, for I know of no Saint who died while holding such an office."<sup>40</sup> It was from this outlook that there grew up his wish to go into quiet and stillness, to weep for his poor life, and for the rest of his days to lead the life of a penitent.

This religious longing grew stronger and stronger in Vianney. It gradually assumed such proportions that it became a sore temptation in his life. Every life has its temptation, and there is no existence completely free of it. But the spiritual man does not have the same temptations as other men, his are on a higher plane—and he is not spared them. Even Jesus had many temptations to overcome, and as the Gospels tell us, they came to him in different forms; but then, "when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from him for a season." Temptations occupy a large part in the lives of the Saints. Sometimes, thanks to them, their religiousness receives an unexpected favour, but often it develops into a spiritual drama which we cannot behold without trembling. With the priest of Ars the temptation—as with Buddha and Tolstoi—took the form of a burning desire to flee from his community, and to end his life in the utter silence of a Trappist monastery. In itself this longing is by no means unintelligible, particularly if we think of the enormous burden which this poor village priest had to bear every day during the long hours of the confession. From the human point of view he was more than justified in retiring into solitude and thinking on the preparation of his soul. But

although this was so reasonable, with the Saint of Ars it would have seemed like being disobedient to the task with which God had charged him, and for the fulfilment of which He gave him inspiration.

Vianney first attempted flight in the year 1840, when, unnoticed, in the thick of night, he wandered along the country lanes until he suddenly stopped dead and said to himself: "Is this really the will of God that I am doing now? Is not the conversion of a single soul of greater worth than all the prayers which I could make in my solitude?"<sup>41</sup> It is very strange to behold a man, who had, almost without thinking, helped countless spiritual children in their most grievous struggles of conscience now, in his own predicament, showing the greatest uncertainty. Vianney suddenly saw his whole design as a temptation. Hesitating, he stood for long by the roadside, and then he finally turned back, with the resolve, "I shall endure until I break down utterly."<sup>42</sup> He now felt that the longing to depart was a wile of the Devil's. But the priest of Ars knew no peace. A few years later, he took up his project again. Again he abandoned his house by a side-door. But the people of Ars, after his earlier attempt, had become suspicious, and this time they saw what he was doing, and tried to stop him. He ran off, and they ran after him. He darted into a sidetrack, and in the end was lucky enough to throw off the men who sought to frustrate his plans. No longer master of himself, Vianney fled, and took refuge in his father's house, where he hid himself away in a room. Meanwhile, at Ars, everyone was in a high state of agitation and the entire populace set about the task of recapturing their runaway Saint. Even the bishop was alarmed, for he was unable to view with favour this self-willed abandoning of the diocese, and he, too, expressed the desire that Vianney should return. For long he hesitated irresolute until, acceding at last to the requests from all sides, he went back to Ars where he received a tumultuous welcome from the inhabitants. The period of calm which ensued, however, lasted only for four years, and in 1847, Vianney suddenly disappeared again. He had gone to Lyons in all secrecy and, arrived there, had asked to be taken into a Capuchin monastery—which, however, was refused him. So he had to return again, and in 1853 he suffered his last temptation of this nature, which failed owing to his lack of foresight. From then on Vianney thought no more of giving up his work as a spiritual guide, and he never left Ars again. The sore temptations had been overcome. If we think about Vianney's repeated, desperate attempts at escape, we see the pathetic side of it. Although the form which his temptation took is rare, and thus can scarcely be fully understood by anyone, yet it gave rise to a spiritual drama, which in greatness is second to hardly any other. The urge for seclusion where alone true bliss is to be found, was too deeply rooted in this man, and that is why it took such a distressing form. But it was just stillness which was denied to Vianney, and he had to live out his whole life without an hour of true peace. The renunciation of solitude was what God demanded of him.

In the meantime the priest of Ars was growing old. For long his hair had been white, for, through his excessive asceticism, he had aged more than





his years. He felt that his end was approaching, since his attacks of exhaustion became more and more frequent. After preaching a sermon he felt faint, and had to lie down. His death was as simple and unassuming as his life had been. This humble village priest disliked any show of pathetic behaviour to the very last; and it was during a storm that, without a struggle, he gave his soul back to his Creator.

## VI

The stream of pilgrims to Ars paid homage, after Vianney's death, to his relics, which were soon the object of pious veneration. The process of canonisation, which was initiated at the beginning of the twentieth century, brought the result, in 1925, that the humble priest of Ars received the highest honour of the Church, and he was included in the index of the Saints. Four years later Pope Pius XI designated him the patron Saint of all priests; and this nomination gives rise to one last reflection.

According to one of the dicta of Danish pietism, "hell is paved with the foreheads of priests."<sup>43</sup> Although this is a purely pietistic horrific image it is true that the profession of the priest does harbour grave spiritual dangers, to which few men are really equal. How can a man—without doing harm to his own soul—continually play the teacher: a man who must all the time be telling everyone from the pulpit what they must do, and who constantly has the very greatest words of wisdom on his lips, which often do not dwell in him at all? Such a function must inevitably lead to a sense of spiritual superiority, which becomes the more unfortunate in that the majority of those who fill the priestly office appear to be unaware of it. Only a humility which is practised daily is capable of averting that lack of spirituality which is to be found among narrow-minded priests. Vianney clearly saw the reefs which underlie the priestly calling, and he sought to circumvent them with the utmost wariness. His pronouncements on the subject of the country priest are entirely devoid of aggressiveness, and could offend no one. Precisely because of their unpretentiousness are they more significant than any fulminating denunciation, and they reveal perceptions which are absolutely unforgettable. For their simplicity, and the truth which they contain, his words can scarcely be surpassed: "There is nothing more unfortunate in the world than the priest! How does he pass his time? In beholding how God is insulted; how His holy name is taken in vain; how His love is disregarded! That is all the priest sees, all he hears. . . . Ah, had I known what it is to be a priest, then, instead of entering the seminary, I would have hastened to become a Trappist."<sup>44</sup> Vianney described himself as a "poor, unfortunate priest," and this genuine feeling guarded him from the smugness of many of his profession. With his lack of intellectual attainments Vianney would not have been capable of writing a book, but the few pronouncements which he made about priesthood are more important than all the heavy tomes of practical theology. Furthermore, they deal with a theme which can never be completely covered by sheer knowledge. Every priest can learn an infinity

of wisdom from the life and words of Vianney, for there could scarcely be a better fundamental principle than this: "A priest should never get the idea into his head that he can do nothing in his parish, however long he has striven and however fruitless his endeavours may have been; nor should he ever think that he has done enough, however hard he may have toiled."<sup>45</sup> Above all did the priest of Ars think much about the nature of priestliness, and without any self-consciousness said: "What it means to be a priest, can only properly be understood in Heaven. . . . If we sought to understand it on earth, we would have to die—not of fear, but of love."<sup>46</sup> A priest will surely undergo a notable transformation if he keeps these words of the ignorant priest of Ars before him every day. It enables him to share Vianney's trouble that no Saints had been found among the priests; and this perception becomes a holy impulse: "How many priests have been spoken of as holy? Scarcely one: perhaps not even that! One Saint was a monk, another was a missionary, these were laymen, many were bishops, and yet for many centuries there have been far fewer bishops than priests! Neither Vincent de Paul nor Francis Regis would remain priests to the end. Yet what a grievous task is that of the priest! The priest too needs contemplation, and prayer, and union with God! But nowadays the priest lives in the world; he speaks, dabbles in politics, reads the newspapers and fills his mind with what he has read. He prays his Breviary, reads the holy Mass, and does it all as something to be done every day. And then, the administering of the Sacraments! Ah, what a terrible thing indeed it is, to be a priest!"<sup>47</sup> Throughout his wordly life Vianney was heedful always, as a priest, to represent that world which is different from the world in which men live from day to day. He was picked out by God to be a Saint, the Saint who rose from the condition of a priest. "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible."

## Theresa of Lisieux

1873—1897

### I

CAN A NUN seriously interest one intellectually? One of those nuns whom one occasionally encounters in a railway carriage, who sits with lowered eyes gazing devoutly upon a little book of prayers, while beside her there is an antediluvian portmanteau and an old-fashioned umbrella? What can a human being whose life is passed in the seclusion of a convent have experienced upon which we could profitably bestow our attention?

The question becomes even more pertinent when we learn that the nun with whom we have to deal was a Carmelite, living in the nineteenth century, whose aesthetic sensibility was moulded by the insipidity of that comfortless age. What Theresa Martin did in poems and paintings is entirely circumscribed by the conventions of the period, and nowhere rises above the small middle-class atmosphere of French provincial life. Even in her celebrated autobiography there are all too many sighs and outpourings of the heart. She makes an abundant use of floral similes, and the way in which she writes of her "dear little Jesus" is often almost intolerable. Her autobiography, indeed, has been described as having an "air of carefully tidied middle-class rooms, full of knick-knacks and trinkets." After her decease the sentimental attitude to her was at once increased. People delighted to represent Theresa with the countenance of an ardent nun bedewed with pearly tears—a "Rose Saint," tricked out in the sticky sweetness of saccharine. The sentimentalism of an indiscriminating public willingly seized upon this shallow pseudo-piety until a protest arose from the ranks of the Catholics themselves. "In order to make such a bitter medicine palatable to the masses a little sweetness was obviously necessary. And this was Theresa's care. Perhaps her convent encouraged her too much in it, but it was well meant and undoubtedly has had good results. Otherwise so many people would not have become so excited about it all."<sup>1</sup> This retouched portrait of her contributed much towards making her known during the pre-war period. To-day, however, after the decisive rejection of the false attitude, it is merely an obstacle in the way of understanding Theresa of Lisieux. The sugary-sweet gushings over her, which were the result of the turn of the century, reached such a scandalous pitch, that, according to the distinguished biography by Ida Görres, one begins to suspect that "the little Saint must in truth have been as all the trash represents her."<sup>2</sup>

Yet all this is but the façade behind which there is concealed a com-

pletely different human being. Whoever is not too shy to pierce through the brown threadbare habit of the nun, with its crucifix and rosary, stands before a figure who, in the inmost core of her being, is completely alien to the spirit of the second half of the nineteenth century. Theresa has scarcely any spiritual connection with the modern world, and thus can in no way be explained as the result of the modern world. It contributes nothing whatever to a deeper understanding of Theresa if one speaks of the history of the end of the nineteenth century, for she never even noticed the pulse-beat of the age in which she lived. We need know nothing at all of her times in order to understand her deep intuition. She might just as well have lived during the Middle Ages; like that of the priest of Ars, her spirit towers up into another world altogether. No contemporary event could affect her. Her spiritual remoteness from the modern style of the nineties may be perceived by anyone who pierces through the thick coating which has covered over her true countenance. Then do we behold the picture of a human being who demonstrated clearly that however barren and desolate the age in which one lives may be, a man can always break through it into the eternal. At all times is it possible to follow the precept of Angelus Silesius: "Man, be natural!" Never can a Christian be excused on account of the empriness of the time, for even the most superficial age allows him to submerge himself in the Divine.

In Theresa's brief existence we find no novelistic experiences. The course of her life did not intersect that of a single personality of any interest. At the same time this nun was mistress of a spiritual affinity which was much stronger than that which all the finely dressed ladies of the fashionable world can claim. While these same ladies could only dress according to the latest dictates of fashion and could show only an outward elegance, and behind it all concealed a frightening hollowness, the appearance of Theresa offers a completely different picture. With her there gradually emerges from an unpretentious veil a human with rare religious qualities, who, the longer we look at her, the more profit do we derive; for she constantly reveals new sides to us. And yet Theresa was not one of those embittered young girls who have taken the veil because they have come off badly in the world. Theresa was pretty, and even as a small girl her attractive appearance had brought her many flattering compliments. With her lovely fair hair, her steel blue eyes, her refined features and her splendid figure, Theresa was beautiful, even exceptionally beautiful, as we may see to-day from her portrait. But it was no made-up beauty which had to bolster itself up by every conceivable artistic means. This nun embodied that beauty of which a Russian poet once said, "Beauty will redeem the world." This may at first seem to be fantastic, but it is none the less true for that. Out of Theresa's countenance there shone that inward beauty which belongs to the metaphysical world. *Philokalia*, as the Greeks called the love for spiritual beauty, has, throughout the ages played an important part in religiousness, and it is also the door which leads us into an understanding of the spirit of this nun, dressed in her old-fashioned clothes.

Theresa embodied that noble beauty of the soul which is as unfathomable

as the sea. Her soul radiates a really intoxicating fragrance. From her being there emanates that wondrous essence which captivates one again and again whenever one approaches her. As the author of the celebrated *History of a Soul*, the young Carmelite made it clear that the soul is not limited to its psychic aspect but is united with God, and is thus the eternal quality in man. When we occupy ourselves with Theresa we are filled with unbounded amazement at the wondrous image of the human soul which is capable of soaring up into eternity, and in its grandeur can only be compared with the world of the stars. In modern times there have been the lives of women which impress one deeply, particularly if one thinks of Eleonora Duse, Vera Finger, and others. But from the early matured Theresa of Lisieux there is diffused a spiritual charm, which is to be found in scarcely anyone else. This spiritual beauty gives the apparently undisturbed course of her life an inner power which no external excitement can come near. She did not spend her living days in sensational experiences; everything was directed inwards and worked unremittingly for the enrichment of her soul. In her soul she experienced the least thing with a burning readiness to surrender herself utterly to every spiritual event, precisely because she lived intensively and not extensively. Her existence is far from being an uneventful life. But the events were all inside her spirit, not outside her. Spiritually this nun experienced infinitely more than all those men, hungry for life, who so breathlessly pursue adventure; and the spiritual always outstrips the material by far.

## II

A slight tinge of sadness colours the childhood of Theresa Martin. It is connected with the cold misty little town of Lisieux in Normandy, which, with its gabled houses, offers a melancholy aspect, and is characteristic of that gloomy province which modern French novelists are wont to describe as an oppressive nightmare. This sadness was aggravated by the early loss of her mother which even her spiritual relationship to her father and also to her elder sisters could not make up for. There was not much to stimulate the intellect in this pious household except for the zealously observed visits to church, and devotional conversations. Of all that was stirring France intellectually at that time, scarcely a word reached this provincial well-to-do family, which, despite its piety, can certainly not be regarded as exemplary in every respect.<sup>3</sup> A less energetic human being might easily have fallen into a dissatisfied state of longing in these carefully sheltered surroundings.

Even darker shadows descended upon the little Theresa when she was sent to board with the Benedictine sisters. The bare class-rooms behind the grey walls of the convent school were unproductive to the young girl, and she felt very unhappy. Due to her originality she found that she had very little in common with the other pupils. Theresa was a person of great spiritual reservedness which consequently conduced to an inner isolation. Even at the school she was spiritually alone; and she was never to emerge

from this spiritual solitude. She herself wrote of her earliest childhood: "I never spoke to anyone about the deep feelings which filled my heart. In silence I saw and heard everything, and much, indeed, which they sought to hide from me."<sup>4</sup> By reason of this inward silence, moreover, like so many proud and noble souls, she was denied all possibility of enjoying the boon of friendship. Apart from her relatives she never met anyone who could win the confidence of her heart. Theresa was always an isolated individual. Grievous, too, were the scruples which, as with so many other pious persons, beset her. She suffered indescribably during this spiritual illness: "Every thought, and every act, was a source of anguish and of perplexity to me."<sup>5</sup> In the self-torment of her youth each failure became two to her.

An indication of the key to this earthly life was given to her in her early youth by something which happened when she still had "half God and half children's games in her heart." When she was once brought a basket filled with trinkets, and was about to choose what she wanted from it, she suddenly, after a moment's reflection, seized hold of the entire contents of the basket, and said triumphantly: "I choose everything." In this childish adventure she herself saw "simultaneously the contents of her whole life" depicted.<sup>6</sup> Obviously there comes to the fore for the first time in this childish cry of "I choose everything" the demand for totality of an extraordinary nature which would never be satisfied with half-measures. In this connection she felt herself greatly attracted to the figure of Joan of Arc, at a time when the heroic Maid was not even spoken of as a Saint, and about whom Theresa later wrote a religious play. At the same time, this episode should not be selected as the starting-point for a religious interpretation of Theresa's life, any more than her "almost unbreakable obstinacy," which was completely impervious to all threats.<sup>7</sup> This small person had a stubborn little head and knew very well how to get her own way, as we may clearly see from her writings. But whether we speak of her sensitive susceptibilities, of her lack of patience, or of the ambition which was controlled only after much toiling, these are but unimportant characteristics which appeared from the very first, and which reveal only a part and never the whole of Theresa's nature.

The most significant change in her young life occurred when, at the age of ten, Theresa fell ill with that mysterious complaint which men have subsequently tried to diagnose as St. Vitus' dance.<sup>8</sup> The illness broke out on the occasion of her eldest sister, who had been as a mother to her, entering a convent. Spiritually, the child was quite unable to bear the absence of this sister whom she loved above all else. She was afflicted by long fainting fits, and became mortally ill. The doctors were unable to do anything about the illness, and they were already abandoning hope of her recovery when she had a vision. In her room there was a statue of the Virgin Mary, which suddenly came to life and walked towards her. "The Blessed Virgin was beautiful, so beautiful that I shall never find words to describe her Heavenly beauty. Her countenance radiated ineffable gentleness, kindness, and tenderness. But what entered into my very soul was

her ecstatic smile."<sup>9</sup> Theresa was so overjoyed by this vision that she was able to conquer her illness. There was understandable excitement in her house at her sudden recovery, which was regarded as nothing less than a miracle.

This would appear to be an innocuous affair, and not worth making too much of a fuss about. There is nothing supernatural in the fact that a fevered child should see the Blessed Virgin smiling in her delirium—and, at the same time, even Theresa herself often doubted later the reality of the apparition.<sup>10</sup> The important thing about this event is not the miracle of Theresa's recovery; the emphasis should be laid, rather, on the smiling of the Queen of Heaven. It is notable that never yet has this experience been truly assessed in respect of its decisive significance in Theresa's religious development. It was the first religious impression which is symptomatic of her development, and in which we may already discern her subsequent religious attitude. Although the child was only ten years old when she saw Mary's smile, she described the event with the utmost clarity. She stated specifically that Mary had a quiet smile, and did not laugh. This distinction may seem to be hair-splitting, but it reveals a fine sense of discrimination. It means nothing less than that the Divine nature was revealed to her in a blissful smile. This amazing fact cannot be explained by Theresa's French nature; it has no connection at all with the Latin graces. It springs up from the depths of religiousness. Nothing was so decisive for Theresa's spirituality as the hour in which she experienced the Divine in this form. Her first religious awareness was not that of being a great sinner, nor did the Divine enter her life as thunder and lightning, hurling her to the ground. Yet many of the great people of religious history have experienced the Eternal in this terrible way. To Theresa, however, the Divine essence was made manifest to her with ineffable gentleness, like the kindness of the sunshine, which cannot be expressed in the words of men. How beautiful, how unutterably beautiful that the nature of Christ should be experienced as a Heavenly friendliness, and that it should appear in this way the very first time that it came to her! Such an experience imprints itself ineradicably on the soul. Although a smile may seem to be the slightest thing there is, what it gives is the mightiest expression of mankind. Upon how we interpret the smile in Theresa's life will depend our understanding of this great figure.

The most significant feature of this whole business is that the incomparable smile communicated itself to Theresa; it penetrated into her and induced her to smile on everything. Her own smile became the reflection of the Divine smile. From now on she was under the impression that "everything on Earth smiled at me."<sup>11</sup> Again and again did Theresa's contemporaries stress the fact that she smiled in a way which it would be impossible to imitate. Her smile had no similarity to the polite, meaningless smile of many people, for there was nothing forced about it. Nor must it be regarded as a sort of magic mask behind which she took refuge. It was a silent smile, which said far more than any words could ever say. We must concede a unique value to it, since it is inimitable. The very least trace of

objectivity in such a smile would make it unnatural and artificial. Theresa's smile rests on a Divine experience and represents a victory over a depressing attitude to life. Her tendency to melancholy, which has been too much disregarded, was clearly noted by herself. The sound of music was "melancholy to her heart,"<sup>12</sup> Sunday had for her "a touch of sadness,"<sup>13</sup> and the sound of revelry was "veiled in wistfulness."<sup>14</sup> A noble sadness, which never deserted her, and which, in view of her life, is not to be wondered at, is clearly perceptible in Theresa's countenance. But these attacks of depression, which can be heard like the sombre drumbeats in the music of Beethoven over and over again, she overcame with a truly royal smile, and cast them down with heroic strength. According to her view, the ultimate will of God is joy, and Theresa herself felt a "deep, ineffable joy" to such an extent that her trembling heart could not endure it without her bursting into tears of sheer joy. An expression of this unearthly joy which, in her own words, is "not to be found in the things about us, but has its dwelling in our innermost soul,"<sup>15</sup> is Theresa's rarely precious smile. The countenance of Theresa smiling through her tears must be regarded as a triumph over the powers of darkness.

Theresa's childhood, also, which made her such a sweet figure, must be interpreted as a radiance of her gentle smile. Her child-like nature is one of the characteristics of this Frenchwoman which first strikes one, and it has been stressed by all her biographers. For she has not gone down to history with the name of "Theresa of the Child Jesus" purely to distinguish her from that great Spanish Mystic, Theresa of Jesus. There is no doubt that Theresa had the soul of a child, as blue and transparent as a mountain lake. Artfulness and holding things back from other people were quite alien to her. Her nature was entirely free from guile. Her heart was utterly pure, and one is tempted to say that she lived in a state of Heavenly innocence. Furthermore, her detachedness arose from a Christian childishness, which was quite unhampered and which enabled her to see the problems of life as simple and uncomplicated. We must be careful, however, not to confuse this childishness, born from the Heavenly smile, with innocuousness. Such an explanation is as out of place as it would be if applied to Matthias Claudius; for what the author of the *Wandsbecker Boten* wrote also gives one at once an impression of child-like simplicity. But this is only the setting around a different attitude. If we look more carefully, we shall see that Claudius' apparently harmless whimsies have an unsuspected importance, as in the case of Hermann Kutter's little heeded *God's Picture-Book for Great and Small*. We find, then, that it is the same with the childishness of Theresa, which has no connection with any attempt to represent everything on a small scale. Her childishness is a profound illustration of those words of Jesus which are so hard to fulfil: "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." This rarely understood saying did Theresa, as few Christians have done, try to spell out anew; and she made the conception of spiritual childishness the key to her later life. An evangelical childishness radiates from her eyes, and one must be amazed at the utter

guiltlessness of them. This mortal frankly did not know the meaning of guilt, which can weigh down on the conscience like a dead weight. How sweet and fragrant she considered this new childishness, she has herself told delightfully: "For some time I had offered myself to the Child Jesus as His plaything. I had prayed Him not to treat me as a costly toy—the sort that children can only look at but may not go near—but rather as a cheap little ball, to be thrown on the floor, kicked, torn up, left lying in a corner, or pressed to His heart. In a word, I wanted to bring delight to the Child Jesus, and to be at the mercy of His childish pleasures."<sup>16</sup> What an ecstatic notion underlies this desire, which could surely only spring to the mind of a French girl, and which betrays a music of the heart, moreover, which could be conceived only by an incipient Saint. But we shall never be able to turn it to good account, if we merely concede to it a playful significance. Obviously the playing motive is contained in it, but it is in the profound sense in which it appears in the words of Solomon, according to which eternal wisdom "rejoiceth in the habitable part of his earth." Mechtild von Magdeburg also speaks, in her "streaming light of Divinity," of a game which God plays with the soul alone, and of which the body knows nothing.<sup>17</sup> The image of the ball is to be found in Mystical literature, although Theresa was not acquainted with this. To feel oneself as a little toy ball in the hand of the Child Jesus implies no guilt of disrespectful friendship, for the distinction is clearly made in the metaphor. Rather does the "way of spiritual childhood"<sup>18</sup> indicate Theresa's profound humility, which is the expression of the beauty of her soul. It really "did, in a strangely literal sense, lead out of one childhood and flowed into the form of a new and pure childhood."<sup>19</sup>

Theresa's unusual relationship to nature is also to be understood as a reflection of her restrained smile. Normandy, with its meadows and woodlands, its gardens and fruit-trees, exercised a powerful influence on her childish soul. Especially did she love flowers, which she tended devotedly. "Still do I feel the deep, poetic emotions which moved my heart when I beheld the corn-flowers, the scarlet poppies, and the daisies of the flowering fields. And I loved the wide expanses and the tall trees. In a word, all the splendour of nature enraptured me and lifted my soul up to Heaven."<sup>20</sup> According to Beronville's admirable description, Theresa knew the "intoxication of the meadows,"<sup>21</sup> which represented to her a continual song, and filled her with an enthusiasm which knew no bounds. The stars, too, she looked upon in speechless rapture, just as she loved the snow. And when she beheld the sea for the first time, she could not tear her eyes away from it. Her feeling for nature pursued her even in her sleep, and usually she dreamed of "forests, flowers, streams, and the sea. And nearly always do I see pretty little children, capture butterflies, and entice birds of a beauty never seen before."<sup>22</sup> This joy in nature filled her sub-consciousness. Theresa had no experience of the demonic and mysterious side of nature. The torturing darkness of creation was strange to her radiant nature for she held to the friendly phenomena; and particularly did she love the unpretentious things, such as the often neglected flowers of the

field. Equally unknown to her was the will to conquer nature by everything within one's power, which has had such a devastating result in the history of mankind. Theresa went willingly to meet—and it was almost as though she were at home with them—every living creature. From this attitude of her soul there arose that sympathetic bond with nature which, by reason of its supernaturalness, cannot be rationally explained, and which belongs wholly to the world of the Saints. In accordance with it, "in all the events of my life, nature was the mirror of my soul. When I did weep, then Heaven wept with me. If I was joyful, the sky, too, was blue and cloudless."<sup>23</sup> In her autobiography she gives many proofs of this wonderful reciprocity which is only granted to humans who stand in a fraternal relationship to nature. It was more than just a religious veneration which characterised Theresa's regard for nature; nature, to her, was principally the creation of God, and she was herself the perfect symbol of it. She stood in a situation of spiritual trust with regard to nature, which enabled an extraordinary power of illumination to radiate from her. She listened to the Divine secret of creation with her heart. For this reason did the book of nature lie open before her, so that she could read the mysterious hieroglyphs with ease, as though she had never done anything else. This new familiarity with nature was possible only because, like Francis of Assisi, she felt herself to be part of nature. Not only did she love the flowers, she also regarded herself as a "flower of the field" in the garden of God; originally, in fact, she gave her autobiography the title of *Springtide of a little white Flower*, and she found her name written in the stars of Heaven.<sup>24</sup> This new intimacy was not in any way just an enthusiasm for nature, although, like so many of the Saints, Theresa must go down to history as one of the great nature-lovers. Her sympathetic ties with nature bring to the fore a possibility which has long been covered over in western spiritual history, and which has been scarcely even mentioned in the voluminous literature about Theresa. Unlike modern man she did not seek in nature a substitute for a lack of religious roots—a substitute which should support man on his slippery path, and which he obviously cannot find since creation is no longer a symbol of the Eternal to him. Theresa's relationship to nature was one of love. With the sureness of a child, without being aware of the intellectual problem, she found the new relationship to nature. This unassuming nun divined the loving way to the creation of God, for which all the great minds of the nineteenth century sought in vain.

To the Divine smile also must be traced the amazing steadiness of purpose which guided Theresa's youth. It is most remarkable that there seems to have been no adolescence in this girl's life. Theresa went through no time of fermentation in which the adolescent human belongs to a spiritual no man's land and which, by reason of its unsettledness, becomes as unendurable to the sufferer as it does to others. At no stage in her life do we find the blasé teen-girl, who delights in giggling at everything, or turns up her nose, and thinks of nobody but herself the whole time. She was invariably the complete reverse of the chaotic human who stands in

the midst of life without any sort of plan, and during the course of these unhappy years of development changes from one path in life to another. Theresa had a straight line to follow: she knew what she wanted, and would allow nothing to deflect her from her course. One of her earliest recollections was of saying, "I want to be a nun, too"; and to this resolve she remained unswervingly true, even when they had to tell her that it was impossible to admit postulants at the age of nine. But in her fourteenth year she reiterated this oft-repeated intention with the greatest force, and would be deterred no longer. She expressed it as her decided wish to enter the Carmelite Order at the age of fifteen. One was thus immediately presented with this situation: a fourteen-year-old girl is filled with the instinct of religious certainty to such an extent that she is preoccupied with one thought only—how to leap directly into Eternity! This early-matured child strove with a mounting longing for the convent, to such an extent that to a modern man, with his attitude to earthly life, it is scarcely comprehensible. Let him not attempt, indeed, to try and grasp something which his nature is quite incapable of grasping. There is only one thing to remember: Theresa did not abandon the world out of weary resignation. This was no disillusioned Ophelia, to whom Hamlet might have said again, "Get thee to a nunnery!" There dwelt within her this frankly tempestuous urge for cloistered seclusion, because even at that time the earth seemed to her to be a place of exile, and she was seduced by a quite unmodern longing for Heaven.

Obviously her intention, announced at such an early age, met with serious obstacles, due to her excessive youth. Her highly persistent nature, which was uncompromisingly tenacious, did not, however, accept obstacles as a reason for capitulation, but rather as a goad which drove her to overcome them. Even though her pious father was soon won over, her influential uncle would have nothing whatever to do with it, and it was later turned down even more categorically by the priest of the convent, who was entirely wrapped up in himself, and finally, by the bishop, whom she had called upon. There was no question of a conspiracy against her, as it has sometimes been represented; the opposition arose purely and simply from the fact that she was too young. It would be quite wrong to cast a slur on these men for their refusing to countenance her plan. Had they acted in any other way, we would have had to accuse them of a grave dereliction of their duty. It would have bordered on the irresponsible to have permitted a fourteen-year-old girl who still ran around with her hair down, and who could not possibly take in at a glance the full importance which such a step would mean to the rest of her life, to shut herself away for ever in the rigours of a convent. Quite rightly did these grown-ups maintain that "it would be sheer folly, and create a scandal which would provoke the criticism of the whole of France."<sup>25</sup> Only one person did not incline to these rational reflections, and this was little Theresa herself. She heard the all too imperious call from the other side. To her determined spirit, there was only one thing to do: to follow the voice from above in all circumstances. She would not permit herself to be discouraged by any veto which

was imposed because the minimum age required by the Church had not been attained. She appealed from court to court; and in the end, with her objective ever in view, she undertook a pilgrimage to Rome. On receiving the papal blessing she took her courage in both hands, and, with a pounding heart, against express instructions to the contrary, she threw herself at the feet of Leo XIII. She besought the Pope for permission to enter the convent at the age of fifteen. This insubordinate addressing of the wearer of the triple crown was a barefaced violation of papal etiquette. Moreover, this kneeling of Theresa's before the Pope seems to be but an insignificant adventure, almost without meaning to the proud nineteenth century. And yet this little scene has a peculiar attraction, which does not only correspond to the romantic heart of Theresa. It is more than disputable, though, that Leo XIII with his penetrating gaze should really have recognised the future Saint in the fourteen-year-old girl kneeling down before him, as has been reported. Had he done so, the Swiss guards would not have had to carry the weeping Theresa away by force from the papal throne. Such foresight can be expected of no man; nor can we even reproach Laveille, her official biographer, for not taking cognisance of the fact, even though he accompanied her on her pilgrimage. Theresa herself was bitterly disappointed at the Pope's attitude, and never afterwards mentioned even a syllable in connection with the episode. Much depressed over the failure of her pilgrimage she returned to Lisieux, where she later, contrary to all expectations, received the news that her petition had been granted. . . .

Now that the still undeveloped child had won her way, there came the sad day when she had to take leave of her dearly loved father, and renounce for ever the joy of wandering through the flowering fields. Again, with beating heart, but this time without tears, she stood before the convent door. "What a moment! What mortal anguish! One has to have been through such a moment in order to conceive it," she wrote herself.<sup>26</sup> Then the door to the world clanged shut behind her, and was never opened to her again. And after a few months there came the time when, clad in a costly garment of white satin, trimmed with swansdown and Alençon lace, and bearing white lilies, she became for ever the bride of Christ, and from thenceforth wore the rough habit of the austere Order of the Carmelites.

### III

The second half of Theresa's brief life could be described in one sentence: the ascent of a soul. All her thinking and acting was devoted to this one theme from now on. The veiled nun had no other interest but this goal, and it was no easy ascent which lay before her. Hers was no winged flight from height to height; her way was as hard as it could possibly have been. And we should also add that her ecstatic gifts from God, such as her inimitable smile, her profound love of nature, and her unswerving singleness of mind, were also to be subjected to severe tests. These were the rich materials which had been given to her, from which she now had to perfect

the fabric of her life. These precious manifestations of her soul realised their imperishable value through the tremendous trial which they had to undergo as soon as she had cut herself off from the world.

A convent life was necessary for the ascent of her soul. The phenomenon of such an existence may be assessed from various points of view. Often it is romantically regarded as a still, cloistered garden, where an idyllic brooklet babbles amid fragrant rose-bushes. Other people have emphasised the unnatural aspect of a cloistered existence, where men must needs grow sour behind the walls. In the case of Theresa, however, neither of these interpretations is to the point, for she looked on the convent as a religious disposition *sui generis*, in which the Christian experience of many centuries is precipitated. When, in her youthfulness, she knocked at the door of the convent, she regarded it as a means to an end which God was giving her. Obviously holiness is not only to be attained in the cloister, but for her it was *the* appointed way. Her entrance into the convent was the only possible course, because her soul knew, with its unerring instinct, that a monastic existence was the indispensable hypothesis for the attainment of the longed for goal. Without the Carmelite convent of Lisieux Theresa would not have been the Saint which she has been to thousands.

From this point of view, therefore, we have only to consider the difficult experiences which Theresa had to go through in the convent. "Everything in the convent enchanted me," she wrote in her autobiography; and in it she found a new family "of whose devotion and tender love the world suspects nothing."<sup>27</sup> This observation is one of the few places in her autobiography which needs to be marked with a question mark. To be true, in composing the history of her life she was pledged to tell the truth, and, moreover, she was passionately fond of the truth. "One should always tell the truth. . . . And now I always do this. . . . If I am loved the less for it—what matter! If people would not hear the truth, they then should not turn to me."<sup>28</sup> And yet it is certain that in spite of her ingrained love of truth Theresa, in her account, has kept silent about certain things out of her love for her Order, which she did not wish to harm. Indeed, she has drawn a veil over many things, for the thickness of which a few of her biographers were extremely grateful. But whoever will not permit himself to be deceived by Theresa's self-control, and who reads her description of convent life attentively, will notice also what is to be read between the lines, which reveals, despite all the restraint to which she subjected herself, an indirect criticism, which is actually more serious than many crude polemical attacks on monasticism. Theresa was far too sensitive a person to give expression to the disillusionment of her soul. But that there was such a disillusionment cannot be seriously contested. It was a wicked atmosphere which she encountered in the convent at Lisieux. It was not the tiny cell—nine feet by nine—with its miserable contents, which oppressed her, but, above all, the human elements, which were in the very sharpest contrast to her own nature. "Smilingly goes Theresa through her convent years—friendly, innocent, smiling, happily. But this smile was the severest instrument of her physical and spiritual penance."<sup>29</sup>

Behind this triumphant smile were hidden all her tears.

The way of the cloister, with its discipline and order, which fashions men, is the way of unusualness. But it is trodden by too many mediocre natures who are not spiritually strong enough to comply with the high demands made of them. Ordinary men are not able to endure a strictly enforced way of life, in which each day is exactly the same as its predecessor, and there is not the slightest variation. For this reason there is in monasteries and convents much life dammed up, lacking its natural outlet. There are few nuns who are happy spiritually. Within the walls of a convent there is a terrifying amount of jealousy and envy. It was no coincidence that Theresa comforted herself with the thought that "no envious thought will light on us in Heaven."<sup>30</sup> There are many injustices and many repressions within convents and monasteries, against which the victims can scarcely fight. Ghéon's saying is only too true: "A cloister too belongs to the 'world.' Wherever there are men, there will there be 'world.' For so has God ordained it."<sup>31</sup> We must bear this truth in mind if we are to assess correctly the situation which Theresa found in the convent at Lisieux. It was neither a particularly elevating nor a particularly decadent convent: it was just an ordinary convent. Canon Delatrouite, the convent's confessor, was a bad-tempered pedant who had not the least time for Theresa. His tactless unfriendliness, however, apparently did not surprise her unduly, for she had already perceived, in the course of her journey to Italy, that "the priests are feeble, decrepit men."<sup>32</sup> And in one of her convent letters are to be found these revealing sentences: "How many bad priests there are, how many priests who are not holy enough! Let us pray, let us suffer for them . . . do you understand the anguish of my heart?"<sup>33</sup> Even more difficult was it for Theresa to have to bear with the unreliable prioress of the convent, María de Gonzaga. If we were to make an uncompromising picture in black and white, we would have to be very careful not to represent María de Gonzaga as a diabolical woman, and to regard her purely as the opponent of the Saint. There is no question but that she was an utterly indescribable person who, with her diseased jealousy, was by no means the ideal nun. The worst of it was that she was in an important position, where she should never have been. Like many psychopaths the wretched woman was filled with the obsession for leadership, and in her ambitious craze for power she sought to lord it over the nuns who were in her charge. She opposed Theresa with a complete lack of comprehension of her, and regarded her with suspicious mistrust. She tormented the young novice unceasingly and with great heartlessness. The prioress continually found fault with her and was always making spiteful remarks about children of fifteen being unable to contribute sufficiently to the work of the convent. If it was Theresa's turn to do weeding in the garden, the prioress considered the task as the equivalent of going for a walk. Theresa, moreover, in accordance with the convent rules, could never once defend herself but had to receive her superior's rebukes with a bowed head and in silence. The prioress never met her but she reprimanded her—and never once, of course, did

she give the girl any word of encouragement. This hostile attitude must have been doubly hard to bear in the case of a child coming from an indulgent home. Unfortunately she received not the slightest compensation for this humiliating treatment from her relationship to the other nuns. The latter had taken the veil in order to lead angelic lives, but in actual fact they were often scarcely able to conceal their spiteful hatred. "What she found was a collection of very commonplace nuns—some of them odd and eccentric, some of them ill and strained, some of them half-hearted and indolent."<sup>34</sup> With the exception of her two sisters by blood there was not the slightest religious or intellectual common level among any of the nuns. This lack of a common religious plane brought about constant friction among the Sisters, who gave themselves up to exaggerated sensibility and venomous maliciousness. Above all did Theresa have to suffer from the viciousness of the petty mind. Like schoolgirls, they always deliberately splashed the dirty water into Theresa's face when they were in the scullery, but she bore their malice uncomplainingly. Many such pinpricks could be mentioned, which Theresa had to endure, and even then the result would be but an inadequate description of the joyless atmosphere within the convent—a state of affairs which was stirred up rather than discouraged by the prioress. Just once did the Saint say, with meaning, that the sufferings which she had set down were far from being the hardest which she had to bear. For she endured what Kierkegaard has called "the martyrdom of being trampled to death by geese."

An unmistakable symptom of the distressing situation in which she lived was the coldness from which, by her own account, Theresa suffered greatly during her life in the convent. Shivering through her whole body she spent many a sleepless night lying on her straw mattress. "I suffered so greatly that I thought that I would die."<sup>35</sup> With the bleak climate of Normandy, living in damp corridors and icy cells, with the constant thought that one would freeze to-day, and freeze to-morrow, and freeze right through the winter, it must have seemed that one faced an extraordinarily harsh fate. Yet Theresa's repining over the continual freezing is not to be understood only literally: for it has another, hidden meaning. The feeling of physical coldness in the damp, cold convent is also the expression of spiritual freezing in the loveless atmosphere which surrounded this love-thirsty nature. She lacked spiritual warmth and sisterly sympathy; but all of this was intentionally avoided in the convent, since it was especially desired to prevent friendships among the nuns. Thus did there arise that spiritual coldness which had an even worse effect on the whole system of the convent than its aesthetic insipidity; and so lovelessness became a second nature to the ostensibly virtuous Sisters. And Theresa bled to death in the absence of charity and neighbourly love.

Even more difficult to bear than all these human hardships was the religious aridity which followed on her entrance into the convent. As is usually the way after a period of religious exaltation, a reaction set in afterwards which took the form of a terrible loneliness. Her call suddenly seemed to her "like a dream, a delusive image,"<sup>36</sup> which dissolved into

nothing. A frightful and sinister notion came over her, which must have given her the feeling that the ground was giving way beneath her feet. Theresa had gone into the darkness, not just in passing, but for a long time. The smile of the Queen of Heaven appeared to her no more. Thrown back on herself, she plunged into her moods of melancholy, and it was this period which gave rise to the words, "My comfort is to enjoy no comfort here below."<sup>37</sup>

Bitter as all these distressing experiences were, Theresa's own attitude to them is of the greatest significance. It is always important to note what a human makes out of the situation in which he finds himself. Even though Theresa was completely misunderstood by everyone in the convent, she never represented herself as a "misunderstood woman." She was incapable of adopting such a fruitless attitude. She was far too obedient a daughter of the Church to raise the standard of rebellion. She viewed every vexatious situation as an opportunity sent by Heaven to show her how her soul might ascend to God; and up this path she was resolved to go. Besides, had she not entered the convent in order to sacrifice herself, to do penance for her soul? It was her expressed determination "to become a great Saint."<sup>38</sup> When she once told Father Blino of her resolve to tread the path of the Saints, and, to this end, to love God as the great Theresa had done, he upbraided her for entertaining such an audacious desire. But there dwelt within her too fierce a longing for greatness to permit herself to be fobbed off so easily. Theresa yearned for holiness, and it was always her most ardent desire to be a Saint.<sup>39</sup> She never felt that she had already reached a state of perfection. When somebody said to her later, "You are a Saint indeed," she replied immediately, "No, I am no Saint; I have never done the deeds of Saints. I am just an insignificant being, whom the Lord overwhelms with His mercy."<sup>40</sup> She did not consider herself as a Saint already, but she strove to become one. From now on this was the focal point of all her endeavour. According to Theresa, holiness is an act of grace which is bestowed on a man by reason of God's judgment, not as the result of his own worthiness. At the same time, man must fight for it, since it cannot reach him on its own. Theresa was one of the few human beings who had the goal of holiness constantly before her, and nothing else. The holiness for which she longed did not consist in working miracles. Theresa must be counted among those Saints who did not work a single miracle throughout their lives. For her, holiness was an inner fashioning, a moulding of one's life in accordance with the will of God, and it stretched out in unwearying endeavour into the highest stage of perfection. Inspired with the recognition of this she harboured not the slightest resentment for her unjust prioress. Rather did she look upon the latter's harsh treatment of her as a means provided by God for her to achieve holiness. She expressly gave thanks for the severe education of the convent as though it were an inestimable mercy. "What would have become of me, if, as the people outside believed, I had been treated as the convent's favourite toy."<sup>41</sup> For the sake also of her striving after holiness Theresa welcomed the disdain with which she was regarded. She wanted to remain un-

known. "We should hide from the eyes of others, and from ourselves as well," she wrote; and went on "the only desirable kingdom is that in which one is unknown and one seeks to be remarked in nothing."<sup>42</sup> In her meditation on Jesus' meeting with Zacchaeus Theresa emphasised especially the fact that the publican had had to hasten down from the tree. In the same way did she interpret every meeting with Jesus as a continual climbing down. She would in no way seek to have the life of the convent made any more amenable, for she believed that any privilege would but render impossible the ascent of her soul to God, for which she continually strove.

On this way to holiness she regarded all her manifold sufferings as most welcome. In her attitude to this, Theresa reveals herself as a much harsher figure than is commonly believed. There was an austerity in her which, at first sight, is surprising. Since the conception of sacrifice played a great part in her thought, she was naturally attracted to suffering. While nearly everybody else tries to give a wide berth to pain and suffering, Theresa was resolved to accept them without complaining. Even when she had to bear them to an exceptional degree, so that in the end she had not a single day free from pain, she made no attempt whatsoever to mitigate it. With her readiness to suffer pain she was determined to bear everything, and her incomparable fortitude in this makes her as great a contrast as there could possibly be to modern man. From an early age she exercised great self-control over pain, and always tried to endure with composure, and even with a smile, all the petty discomforts of life such as headaches, stomach-aches and so forth. In her heart there burned a lively longing for suffering. "The movement of my heart was more and more towards suffering. I found an irresistible attraction in it, which enraptured me, although I did not clearly recognise this."<sup>43</sup> She thirsted for suffering, and "prayed for the mercy of becoming a martyr."<sup>44</sup> There is nothing in her life which does not indicate how she bowed down unreservedly to whatever was decided for her. She strove only to be at one with a destiny of suffering. This goal she reached through a violent spiritual exertion, and this should prevent us, in an access of sentimental heedlessness, from speaking of "pretty little Theresa." In her striving to welcome pain with love she rose to a heroic stature, and thus found herself finally on the path of the ascent to God. Theresa was always highly conscious of the unusual, and this prevented her from frittering herself away in a normal way of life. It awoke in her the resolve to suffer almost to the point of unconsciousness. Like a second Veronica she took part in the agony of Christ, and in her handkerchief she received a new conception of Jesus. Often does one stand aghast at this insatiable readiness to welcome all suffering, which with her, paradoxically, merely served to increase her joy. "I find but one joy, which is suffering; and this joy, which lies not in the emotions at all, surpasses all others."<sup>45</sup> She carefully contrived to conceal this joy in suffering from the other nuns at the convent, and always went about happily, giving the impression that she was always ready for some fun. When in the last days of her illness somebody asked her naively if nobody had

known about her pain, she smiled back, "and pointing to a little glass which contained a sparkling red liquid, she replied: 'Look on this glass! You would think that it held a precious liqueur. But in reality it is the bitterest of medicines. It is a picture of my life. In the eyes of others it has always been steeped in the fairest, serenest colours. They thought that I was drinking the richest of wines, when it was nothing but bitterness. I say bitterness albeit my life was not a bitter one; for I knew how to turn bitterness into joy and sweetness.'"<sup>46</sup> These words represent one of her most profound perceptions: the transformation of suffering into joy. This illogical, incomprehensible fact is one of her essential secrets. Theresa knew joy, but it was a joy wrung from suffering, and this was one of the highest achievements of her life. And at this very moment does the divine smile reappear: "If I do suffer much, if unpleasantness comes upon me, then do I greet it with a smile instead of accepting it despondently."<sup>47</sup> Never did Theresa behave as though she had a cross to bear, but through all her pain and suffering appeared with her incomparable smile. Obviously it was no longer the smile it had been in the first half of her life. It had been through the school of suffering and been put to the proof: it was now the Divine smile. One is obliged to speak of a singing soul; and this smiling in suffering is the stage beyond which no further development is possible. It can neither be compared with the smile of the peoples of Eastern Asia, nor has this smiling in suffering any connection with masochism. Like all mystical suffering it can only be understood as emerging from the spiritual world of the Saints, according to which the soul cannot ascend to God without suffering. Only by bearing this in mind can we fully understand this phenomenon. Christian wisdom has always indicated spiritual suffering as the shortest way to God. And it was the realisation of this truth which led Theresa to welcome all her suffering. For this reason must she be numbered among those mortals who have suffered exceedingly, and who have reached the last stage of perfection.

So that suffering may help a man to holiness he must suffer in love, and love in suffering. The most beautiful thing about Theresa, which is closely bound up with her suffering, is her boundless capacity for love, which she has thus sung in one of her best poems:

*Him Whom I love shall my smile lighten,  
E'en though to try me He veil Himself—  
Waiting, I smile through the night and the anguish,  
This is the Heaven which fills my heart.*<sup>48</sup>

This virgin nature, which, like Mary, might have said "seeing I know not a man," was possessed of a heart which nearly burst with love. It was granted to her—even as it had been denied to Rilke, wherefore the poet, spiritually, perished—to be able to love. One can only truly live in love. To most people the perception of this truth is only realisable as a brief amorous experience, while Theresa transformed the agape into a lasting condition. Obviously she did not understand love as a simple emotion

which easily ends as an illusion. For her, the "true love is nourished on sacrifice,"<sup>49</sup> and only the complete sacrificing of one's ego was, in her view, the only attitude to love which did not end in disappointment. That love is the only means whereby mankind can achieve perfection—the perception of this is the door which reveals the innermost essence of this nun. Theresa said nothing about love which had not already been said before her by Gertrude the Great, Catherine of Genoa, Mary Magdalene Pazzi, and other mystics. But she did embody love in her life in a new way which shows vividly how she was able to mount to greater and greater heights in her spiritual ascent. Similarly, on the first page of her autobiography she praises God, Who had been pleased to fill her little heart with the spirit of love. According to Theresa, "Love makes up for a long life."<sup>50</sup>

It was this attitude which led Theresa to the practice of love in the course of everyday life. "Brotherly love took possession of my heart, and with it the need for forgetting myself always. From then on I was happy."<sup>51</sup> She sought to put into effect the commandment that we should love our neighbours—which was so grievously ignored in the convent. She tried to understand the commandment in all its implications until at length she divined "that true love comprises enduring the shortcomings of our neighbours, not being wounded by their weaknesses, and building up the very least of their virtues. Especially did I learn, moreover, that love of our neighbours should not remain locked away in our hearts."<sup>52</sup> Even more impressive than these words is the way in which Theresa herself put them into effect. In the convent there was a Sister with whom nobody could get on, and whom even Theresa, conceivably found unsympathetic. The Saint overcame her repugnance, however, and devoted much of her time to this Sister whom no one liked. She spoke with her whenever this was permissible, and made her happy with her radiant smile. Nobody in the convent, not even her own sisters, realised the spiritual effort she was exercising in this affair, and more than one of the nuns expressed her wonder that Theresa should appear to like this conceited, foolish Sister best of all.

Theresa's love stretched up to God, Who, ever since she had entered the convent, had become more and more important to her. The love of God, which Jesus thought was the first and greatest commandment, became, in the case of Theresa, a veritable flame. She loved God, as she herself repeatedly said, "to the point of folly."<sup>53</sup> With unlimited passion did Theresa love God, she was transported by love, and knew the real raptures of love. The consciousness of her love filled this declaration: "And if I should come into purgatory, well and good: I shall wander at pleasure through the flames like the three young men in the fiery furnace, and sing the song of love."<sup>54</sup> When it was made known to her that from the depths of hell an act of love could never reach up to God, she called out in the exuberance of her heart: "Willingly shall I go to this place of torment, provided that there also is the Lord eternally loved."<sup>55</sup> The foolishness of this utterance was apparent to Theresa herself, but she only thought to express that she did not covet Heaven but was ready to love God in all

circumstances. "To love and to be beloved, and to come back on to the earth in order to ensure that love is beloved,"<sup>56</sup> this was how she understood her mission. God must, "above all, even to the point of excess, be loved,"<sup>57</sup> as He was never loved before. Some people have regarded this attitude as audacious, and in doing so have shown that they have not understood Theresa. Although the greatest thing which mankind is charged to do must be kept within limits, in the case of the love of God, and only in this case, boundlessness is the decisive criterion. There can be no superabundance of God's love. An ardent love which breaks down all barriers is the noblest feature of Theresa's ecstatic soul. Christianity declines to a wearisome thing if it moves in the same grooves always, but it is raised up in an instant to the summit, when it remembers its divine intoxication. With Theresa this took a more and more ardent form, and her observation in this respect is accurate: "One is consumed by love only in so far as one surrenders oneself to love."<sup>58</sup> In the end, this nun of Lisieux entertained "no greater wish than that I should so love that I would die of love. . . ."<sup>59</sup> With this brave longing to die of love the Saint began to sing the new song of love, which in her mouth could be none other than that great song of love which Paul had already begun to sing in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, and which found a new intonation with Theresa. Without being guilty of any exaggeration was she able to write: "At last I have found my calling! My calling is love!"<sup>60</sup> This cry was a reality with her. When she lay on her death-bed, she frequently said: "I am not sorry that I surrendered myself to love."<sup>61</sup> A love which overflows to such an extent could scarcely be addressed to a human partner. It must stretch out to a supernatural object, for only the Eternal is completely adequate for such an infinite desiring.

It will contribute little towards illuminating this ardent love of Theresa's if we have recourse to the various elements which made up her background. Her pre-convent education, apart from her hunger for knowledge, is, moreover, in dispute. It has, however, been noted that Theresa had visited both Paris and Italy. But this tells us very little, excepting that she probably visited the museums; furthermore, she was only fourteen years old. At any rate, she knew nothing of the artistic and literary intellectualism of Paris, and her paintings show that she had seen nothing of impressionism. What is worthy of remark in Theresa's general background is due to the convent and her consequent familiarity with certain mystical writings. Of spiritual works Theresa was indebted, above all, to the immortal *Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis, which, in the end, she knew off by heart. With the greatest of zeal did she devote two years to the works of John of the Cross, whose words she must understandably have felt deeply during her period of spiritual aridity. But the most surprising revelation which she found in her life in the convent was the Bible, which came to have more and more significance for her, and was finally her only book. In the Holy Scriptures she especially liked the Gospels. She was candidly perplexed when she perceived "the differences between the various versions," but did not pursue the problem any further.<sup>62</sup> Finally even the

books became an obstacle to her for she "felt confined by the rigid formulas of prayer, and by the devotional books on which her gaze had to be lowered the whole time in the chapel, for they were only a grievous hindrance and not a help to her."<sup>63</sup> With her custom of praying wordlessly she said that all the books and written prayers merely gave her a headache. "I find that it is a great effort to have to tell my beads, and I do it only for love of one of our Sisters; but I am caught in a grievous net,"<sup>64</sup> she wrote. From the religious point of view she enjoyed a direct relationship: "Jesus alone has taught me: nothing have I learned from a single book or any theologian."<sup>65</sup> To be sure, she once observed in her autobiography that she was no mystic.<sup>66</sup> In a certain sense this is true, for visions occupy an infinitesimally small space in her life. It will give us a false conception if we place the chief emphasis on her mysticism, and force her words into a mystical system.<sup>67</sup> But the mystical tendency is by no means completely lacking. Theresa felt the ecstasies of love, and by her own account, "I suddenly felt myself wounded by a mighty fiery radiance, so that I thought I must die. I do not know how I am to describe this condition: there is no comparison with which to illustrate the power of these flames. It seemed as though an invisible might were plunging me wholly right into the fire. Ah! What a fire, and what sweetness!"<sup>68</sup> Like all great religious natures, Theresa, too, had a mystical vein, without which her ascent to God is inconceivable. "For long had Jesus and little Theresa gazed at one another and understood. . . . On that day, however, our meeting could no longer be called a simple looking at each other. We went into each other. No longer were we two separate beings. Theresa had vanished, like a drop of water lost in the wide ocean—Jesus alone remained."<sup>69</sup> Theresa believed she could "feel the embraces of Jesus."<sup>70</sup> States of ecstasy, however, were not natural to her. She herself said, "without showing Himself, without letting His voice be heard, Jesus teaches me secretly."<sup>71</sup> About her innermost relationship to God, despite the discursive nature of her autobiography, Theresa maintained a reserved silence. "I cannot and will not tell all. There are things which lose their perfume as soon as they are brought into the air. So also are there thoughts and feelings which may not be dressed in words without instantly forfeiting their deep, Heavenly meaning."<sup>72</sup>

This reserve corresponded to her ideal of holiness, which, nevertheless, she has expressed in the clearest possible way. Neither by miraculous manifestations nor by the practice of extraordinary penances did she seek to find her way to God. Certainly she scourged herself in accordance with the rigorous dispositions of the French Order of the Carmelites three times a week, just as all the other Sisters did; and she wore a spiked crucifix on her bare flesh.<sup>73</sup> But bodily punishment was not important to her. Such violence seemed to her to be more in keeping with religious heroes. She herself felt called upon to go the small way, and in doing so she resumed the first half of her life, the childishness, only now she gave to it a higher significance. She strove to perform to the best of her ability the insignificant things of everyday life—not unlike Francis de Sales, in whose footsteps she followed, without knowing it. "Oh believe me, thinking beautiful, holy

thoughts, writing books, describing the lives of Saints—all this does not compensate for willingly giving an answer to a call for help. I have practised this, and I have known the peace which comes from it.”<sup>74</sup> In her endeavour to conceal greatness with a small name is hidden the real “secret of Lisieux.” She came to the “practice of small things,”<sup>75</sup> because she felt that she herself was an unimportant soul which was capable of bringing to God “only the very little things.”<sup>76</sup> This she called the little way, which taught her soul to practise the Divine in the midst of everyday things. Everything that she did, little souls must also do. “It is the way of spiritual childhood, the path of trust and of complete devotion. I offer you the little way, which has been so good to me; and I shall tell you that there is only one thing to do on this earth: to strew the flowers of your little sacrifice before Jesus, and to win Him through love.”<sup>77</sup> Theresa sought to give the paradigm of her theme of love in all its inflections. “Remaining small means recognising one’s insignificance, waiting for everything to come from God, and not being too downcast at one’s mistakes, for little children often fall down, yet they are too small to receive much harm; it means, further, laying up no wages for oneself, and worrying about nothing.”<sup>78</sup> This littleness or smallness is not to be confused with pettiness, and still less should it be regarded as much ado about nothing. It contains within it a release from all the terrors of Hell, of which Theresa herself had given the proof. “No, I cannot share this fear; I am too small and insignificant to be damned; very little children are not found in Hell.”<sup>79</sup> The conception of littleness embodies her religious creed, and she expressly desired to be known as “little Theresa.”<sup>80</sup> But let us not delude ourselves. This little way, which she taught, is only apparently little, and we are guilty of no sleight of hand if we regard it as very large. This bringing of a little sacrifice is difficult, very difficult, and infinite endeavour is required to achieve it. It is not given to everybody to be able to do the usual things in an unusual way, and only too many people go down before it. To it we may apply the words of Hölderlin: “The greatest is often manifested in the smallest.”<sup>81</sup> With her teaching of the little way Theresa found a new path to holiness, which dresses heroism in the raiment of the insignificant. She opened up a new highway, which has an unsuspected importance for modern holiness.

This attitude of spiritual childishness was due in part to the fact that Theresa was ignored for so long in her convent. Everything about her was veiled, and only perceptible to eyes which could pierce below the surface. She was often told to her face that she was not liked in the convent. One of the nuns stated quite clearly: “I cannot understand why people make such a personage out of Sister Theresa: she does nothing of any particular note, one never sees her practising any of the virtues, and so one cannot say that she is even a good member of the Order.”<sup>82</sup> Even just before her death a nun said just outside the open window of the cell where Theresa lay dying: “However worthy of love this little sister is, she has certainly never done anything remarkable”,<sup>83</sup> and another said: “Sister Theresa will soon be dead: whatever will our Mother Prioress write in her death notice? She

came to us, lived, and died—it would really be better to leave it at that.”<sup>84</sup>

Out of the lack of understanding with which she was regarded throughout her sojourn in the convent, Theresa moved into her last phase in which she fell a victim to her incurable illness, and in which she had to undergo her severest trial. Human nature can only with difficulty endure the ecstatic extravagance which was Theresa's. The fire of Divine love burnt up her strength before its time. The world does not seem to have been created for souls such as hers: they touch here but for a moment, and then are off again. Theresa always sensed that she would die young. A great longing for death lived within her. When her tuberculosis reached the stage of her spitting blood every night, and staining her handkerchief red, she said nothing to anyone about it. She was overcome by a visible joy, for she recognised it as a first sign of her entrance into the life eternal, which could not be long delayed. For long did she seek to keep her distressing state of health a secret. She sought to prepare herself alone for the “great law of dying.” In the darkness of the night she struggled feverishly with her choking, without letting a trace of it appear in the morning. Later, much too late, did the fast progressing illness become apparent to her companions in the convent. Only when she was seized by fits of teeth-chattering shivers, and fighting for breath, could she lie down. And even then she received no proper care and attention. She was given scarcely any kind of remedy or palliative, although she was suffering from the most acute pains, which drove her almost to the verge of suicide. The doctor stated that he had never seen this illness in such a virulent form. Although her bones soon began to pierce through the skin, occasioning countless wounds, the prioress, to the last, forbade the application of anything to alleviate the pain.

The frightful pains to which her bodily suffering gave rise, were not the worst she had to bear. Much more was she tortured by the spiritual agonies which she had to endure during these last months. Theresa was again lost in the darkness, and suffered sore tribulations. “Look down there beside the chestnut trees, the black place where nothing more can be distinguished. . . . In such a dark place do I find my soul and my body. . . . Oh this darkness!”<sup>85</sup> Black thoughts and night phantoms frightened her. This girl who knew nothing of the universe, to whom all modern speculation was unknown—Theresa had considered atheism as an impossibility—had, in her last stages, to begin to fight with the demons of Hell. Her whole fabric of faith began to waver. The night of Gethsemane dragged her down and down. The feeling of being forsaken by God, which Jesus knew upon the Cross, became Theresa's too. “If you but knew what terrible thoughts torment me,” she whispered on her deathbed, “the false reasons of the materialists are dragging at my spirit”;<sup>86</sup> and she could give them back no answer. The blasphemous arguments came out from deep down within her, for she had had too sheltered an existence to be able to have picked them up from hearsay. Her sisters were aghast at her temptations. “I could express what I am going through—but it is impossible! One must go through this dark tunnel oneself to understand its darkness,”

she moaned,<sup>87</sup> and, on another occasion, added: "When I regarded the blue firmament, I could think of nothing but that the earthly sky is beautiful: Heaven went further and further away from me."<sup>88</sup> God's silence weighed down on her to such an extent, that she felt that she was being crushed into nothingness. On her bed of sickness she suffered the worst agonies of spiritual emptiness. Out of her heart came these terrible words: "The Devil is all around me. I do not see him, but I feel him. . . . He torments me and holds me fast in his iron grip, and so prevents me from having the slightest respite. He increases my wickedness so that I do despair. . . . And I may not pray."<sup>89</sup> The anguish which beset this seraphic soul is a sign that God does not reward His Saints with an easy death. But even in the midst of this frightful condition "there always played about her lips a gentle smile";<sup>90</sup> and even on her dying day she greeted the Sisters who entered the cell with a "lovely smile."<sup>95</sup>

It was a torturing, almost unending agony, and one can scarcely conceive of a more cruel ending. To few Saints was it given to die in a way comparable with her death. The choking fits of the consumption made her death struggle one of extreme bitterness. "This is the pure agony of death, without any mingling of comfort," she breathed to herself.<sup>92</sup> For nearly two months she had to endure this, and could not receive the Communion. "Without doubt is it a great mercy to receive the Sacraments; and even when it does not admit us to God, it is still good. . . . Everything is mercy,"<sup>93</sup> she said; and in these last three words she summed up magnificently the decisive message of the Gospel. Theresa suffered indescribably during this long and agonising dying. With burning cheeks and icy feet she lay there, her whole body bathed in sweat, and scarcely able to breathe. Never did Theresa show more strength over herself than in this cruel death, for the little Saint was very great. With astounding resignation she bore her dreadful agony, and through it all was her Divine smile, to which she remained faithful to the end. "All right . . . all right . . . all right . . . Oh, I would not suffer any more!"<sup>94</sup> Asked what she said to God in this terrible situation, she replied: "I say nothing at all to Him, I love Him."<sup>95</sup> The last words of all, which she uttered, were these: "Oh . . . I love Him . . . my God, I . . . love . . . Thee!"<sup>96</sup> With these wonderful words, which were wrung from her in her bitterest hour, the eyes of the convent community were at last opened to the realisation that a Saint was in their midst. But by now it was all too late, just before the end. Only in the shadow of death was the veil dropped from Theresa so that her holiness became visible to her Sisters. In the evening of September 30th, 1897, there shone in the eyes of the twenty-four-year-old nun—after days of agony—a sudden happiness, which raised all their hopes. Then she closed her eyes. She had reached her goal. "Scarcely was she dead, it seemed, for the happiness of the last instant had impressed her features, and a sweet smile did light up her countenance."<sup>97</sup> So the Divine smile had the last word, and marked her features for eternity.

## IV

Death presents man with the hardest problem, and there is no solution to it. To modern men the problem of death has reached the proportion of being a spiritual agony, since he cannot classify it in his existence. In his eagerness for life the man of to-day is no longer content to die, old and sated with life, like Job. He struggles against the destiny of death, but can come to no understanding with it. The question of Tolstoi's Ivan Ilyitch oppresses him: "I shall be no more: but what, then, is being? Being nothing. Where shall I be, if I am no more?"<sup>98</sup> The eternal question of what happens afterwards leaves modern man no peace. The acceptance that with death one sinks into nothingness argues a senselessness against which he struggles vigorously. For the most part this interpretation is not advocated openly, but is covered over with agnosticism. The traditional idea of a Christian Heaven is shattered for modern man by the modern conception of the universe. No less confusing is it, in view of the relationship established by the natural sciences between man and beast, to explain the hope of immortality with regard to the fate of the dumb creatures. For this and similar reasons is man afflicted by the problem of death in all its tormenting darkness.

Theresa of Lisieux answered the question of the hereafter in an especially impressive way. Yet the problem of eternal life was the principal theme of her bitter temptations of doubt, which troubled her illness. And at the same time as these doubts the knowledge of personal immortality also broke down. "As you wish! As you wish! Rejoice in death who will not bring you what you hope for, but an even darker night, the night of nothingness," she whispered during her bitter trial of faith; and she stated quite openly, on one occasion: "I believe no longer in eternal life; it seems to me that after this mortal life there is nothing more, that all is vanished, and only love remains."<sup>99</sup> We can scarcely imagine what this pronouncement means in the mouth of a nun, who during her whole life, has had holiness as her goal. Only if we are able to place ourselves in this sombre, lightless situation can we understand a little of the tortures which Theresa had to suffer during the last months of her life. But, regardless of the darkness, she always remained unswervingly obedient to God. To this unshakable loyalty was due the fact that in the midst of her tribulations she was able to fight through to an answer to the problem, which, in mercy, surpasses everything she had ever said till then.

As with all the Saints, Theresa laid the greatest emphasis on being, and not on the uttering of contemplative words. It was not her task to examine the question of immortality in a religious or a philosophical way. She had had no fantastic visions, nor uttered any theoretical illumination on the subject. But, after her torturing struggle, Theresa was finally able to give her practical answer; and that is, as with the Theodocian problem, the only sensible way in which the question of the hereafter can be met. She told the Sisters of the convent, "from Heaven shall I repay you."<sup>100</sup> Clearly did she explain: "I shall use my Heaven to do good on earth."<sup>101</sup>

She did not desire to enjoy any selfish happiness. This mortal who had previously longed so passionately for Heaven wished, in the final phase, to return to earth to do new works of love. According to Theresa's own words her mission only began (and she was only convinced of it, suddenly, at the end of her life) after her death. For this reason did she long to die, because, in so doing, she would be able to make mankind understand from her life in the hereafter, what she could not say on earth. When one of the Sisters wanted to know if she would look down on her from Heaven, Theresa answered, surprisingly, that she would not look down, but she would come down. Finally she uttered the words which have since become famous: "After my death I shall let fall a rain of roses."<sup>102</sup> With this brave speech, which we find in the old legend of the Saints, Theresa answered the question of a life hereafter, in the manner of a Saint; and she set the problem of death in the light of Christianity, according to which, life arises from death. Theresa hoped to radiate strength, and thus give proof of the transcendental reality of the dead. Only when there arise real signs of the invisible presence of the dead is the existence of them beyond discussion.

Although the dead have often "done their way," as the poet says, much more so have the Saints. Theresa really did rain down roses, which, at a blow, made this unknown nun into one of the greatest figures of modern Church history, and which is, above all, the immense result which emerged from her autobiography, *History of a Soul*. Theresa wrote her notes at the bidding of her superior. She herself thought it was an offence against humility to write about herself. "It would be humbler, not to write about oneself," was her opinion; for she thought there was no value to be derived from regarding oneself.<sup>103</sup> Since she had to obey the order, she wrote, without making any corrections, on paper so bad that not even a schoolgirl would have used it. The last part she scribbled in pencil, sentence by sentence, with weary effort, sitting in an armchair. She wrote her autobiography according to no pre-arranged plan, and without correcting it afterwards; and in the end she said of it: "Now do I see that all which I have said and written is true."<sup>104</sup> After her death these pages were at once given to the press by the nuns of the Order of the Carmelites. They roused a storm of enthusiasm. They were later made available to the public, and the *History of a Soul* had a sweeping success, in which it was translated into nearly every language in the world, and millions of copies were sold. This is natural, for in this book, Theresa, by her own account, had placed her whole soul. Religiously inclined readers can scarcely go deep into this autobiography without their whole spirits beating. The prose has the effect of holding fire in one's hands. The book fulfilled an incomparable mission, and came into the hands of men who scarcely ever take up a religious book at all. Theresa, the *petite soeur de France*, has, with this autobiography, made even posterity happy with her Divine smile. Richly indeed have Theresa's roses rained down upon the earth; and perhaps even into this account one of her fragrant roses has fallen.

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